

# ROYAL NAVAL AIR STATION STRETTON

THORN  
INN



## H.M.S. BLACKCAP

CINEMA





# ROYAL NAVAL AIR STATION STRETTON

## H.M.S. BLACKCAP





# INTRODUCTION

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Produced by

Antrobus Heritage 2004  
Birchmoss  
New Road  
Antrobus  
CW9 6NY

Antrobus Heritage has carried out a number of projects concerned with recording, preserving and improving the heritage of Antrobus Parish. Including the production of a book entitled  
'ANTROBUS – A Country Parish at the Millennium'.

Two members of the Antrobus Heritage group attended the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of Royal Naval Air Station, Stretton. It had been organised by the Manchester branch of the Fleet Air Arm Association and they also mounted an exhibition of photographs.  
The idea for this book and an accompanying archive came after we identified that there was a clear need to record the heritage that was the Royal Naval Air Station, Stretton.

HMS Blackcap was in fact located in Appleton and the surrounding area including part of Antrobus.

With the majority of the airfield buildings demolished and the number of surviving personnel and locals of that era dwindling fast we felt there was no time to lose. This book is based upon the many personal accounts, memories and photographs that we received from former personnel, local inhabitants and others. Background facts have been culled from the sources mentioned in the bibliography. It is a book primarily for those who are interested to read about this particular Air Station, for whatever reason. It is not intended for the aircraft, airfield or naval enthusiast although we hope that he or she may find a few pieces of new information.

The format of A4 landscape was chosen for a 'coffee table' book that can be picked up and browsed through over a period.

We have tried to verify or corroborate facts as far as possible, within our resources. With a reliance on personal accounts dating back 45 to over 60 years this was difficult. No doubt there will be some items that readers may disagree with or are even aggrieved by. We would wish to record the occurrence of such issues in the archive but can only do so if we are notified in writing.

The communication should be sent to the above address.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the following people for supplying information, whatever the quantity or content. Their contributions were the foundation for the book. We apologise if anyone has inadvertently been left off

## Ex-Blackcap personnel

George	Chadwick	P.O. (A.A. 4)	1942	1943
Fred	Garner	Air Mech. (A)	1942	1943
J.A.	Gledhill	Sub-Lt. (A) A.N.Z.N.V.R.	1942	1943
Gladys	Lee	Wren Writer	1942	1945
Margaret	Ogilvie	Wren Coder	1942	1945
Betty	Barnish	Wren Signaller	1942	1946
Patricia	Keeley	Wren Cook	1942	1946
Peter	Lyons	Photographer	1943	1944
John	Barton	Ldg. Air Mech. (L)	1943	1945
Audrey	Hulme	Wren Writer (Air Stores)	1943	1945
Caroline	Bowey	Wren Armourer	1943	1945
Arthur	Smith	Act/Tmp Master-at-Arms	1944	1945
Pamela	Jones	Wren Teleprinter Op.	1944	1946
Josephine	Butler	Wren P.O. (Reg)	1944	1947
Susan	Brough	Wren Cinema Operator	1945	1946
Tom	Rogers	Air Mech. (E)	1945	1946
Walter	Prince	Air Mech. (A)	1945	1946
Brenda	Vicary	Wren Air Mech. (A)	1945	1946
Sid	Hamilton	A.A.3	1945	1946
Betty	Barnish/Knowler	Civilian P.B.X. Operator	1946	1952
George	Rose	Air Mech. (E)	1947	1949
Jim	Buie	Air Mech. (E)	1947	1949

## Other people

Barry	Abraham
Kenneth	Benney
Vera	Brocklehurst
June	Brown
M.P.	Cocker
John	Flanagan
Bernard	Hampton
Colin	Haughton
Mary	Hazelhurst
Margaret	North
Angela	Pickthall
David	Ravenscroft
Karl	Rundle
Jerry	Shore
Ken	Stanier
John	Streeton
John	Sykes
John	Taylor
Bob	Taylor
Ray	Williams
Richard	Williams
Alan	Taylor



Barbara	Gait	Civilian Secretary	1947	1956
Lawrence	Harrison	Sick Berth Attendant	1948	1948
Willam	Clelland	Air Mech. (L)	1948	1949
Basil	Nash	Lt. (A) R.N.	1948	1949
Florence	Flanagan	N.A.A.F.I.	1949	1949
F.M.	Rouse	Air Mech. (A)	1949	1950
Tony	Perrett	P.O. (A.A.4)	1949	1952
Arthur	Gardner	Air Mech. (A)	1949	1952
Beryl	Jones	Wren 2nd Officer	1950	1951
Terry	Lowden	Air Mech. (L)	1951	1953
Bernard	Cohen	Naval Airman (H)	1952	1953
J.R.	Gee	Lieutenant R.N.	1952	1955
Clarrie	Gibson	S.A. (Stores)	1953	1954
A.S.	Lamb	Air Mech. (L)	1954	1955
Nev.	Boulton	P.O. (A.A. 4)	1954	1956
Arthur	Percival	Ldg. Airman 2 (H)	1954	1956
Don	Perry	Air Mech. (A)	1954	1956
Barbara	Gait	Civilian Secretary	1954	1958
Derek	Leigh	Civilian fitter's mate	1954	1959
J. (Buck)	Taylor	Air Mech. (E)	1955	1957
John	Redfern	Naval Airman (H)	1956	1957
Dennis	Handley	P.T. Instructor	1956	1958
Frank	Campbell	Ldg. Air Mechanic (L)	1956	1958
Arthur	Gardner	Ldg. Air Mechanic (A)	1957	1958
Stanley	Jones	Civilian Driver	1958	1958
Brian	Coglan	Ldg. Writer	1958	1958
Kenneth	Roberts	Lt. Commander R.N.	1958	1959
Douglas	Wyatt	Air Artificer 3	1954	1956
H.G. (Tom)	Knowler	Bandmaster	1949	1953

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SHORE ESTABLISHMENTS OF THE ROYAL NAVY	Lt. Cdr. B. Warlow R.N.
THE R.N.V.R.	J. Lennox Farr and Wilfred Granville





Mrs North

R.N.A.S. Stretton 1956



## **`The Blackcaps`**

**Naylor`s buses, Blue Line fags  
Station Dances, Ma Parr`s mags  
Daily Orders, Planes to tend  
Sunday Divisions, Make and mends  
To those who worked, and those who skived  
To those who lived, and those who died  
Shipmates, oppo`s, wingers, crew  
We ever keep good thoughts of you  
Today, we hold you in our hearts  
God bless you all.**

**Arthur Gardner  
May 1999**

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# **THE FLEET AIR ARM**

After Bleriot crossed the Channel on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1909 the Admiralty modified its preference for lighter-than-air craft over aeroplanes. This was mainly a theoretical change though as little of practical value had been done anyhow. Development of a naval air corps was given a kick-start in 1912 when two members of the Royal Aero Club offered the loan of two aircraft and to train four officers to fly aeroplanes. On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1912 the Navy and Army aviation corps were merged into the Royal Flying Corps (R.F.C.). This situation only lasted though until 1<sup>st</sup> July 1914 when the Admiralty formed the Royal Navy Air Service. This comprised all the naval aircraft and personnel of the naval wing of the R.F.C. plus the various associated aviation departments and the existing R.N. Air Stations.

After war was declared on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914 the R.N. Air Service was made responsible for the Air Defence of the British Isles. This was because it had more aircraft than the R.F.C.

On 1<sup>st</sup> April 1918 the two forces were once more amalgamated to form the Royal Air Force (R.A.F.). At the time it was the largest air force in the world and had about 125 coastal air stations. For almost 20 years the R.A.F. developed the land based side of the force at the expense of the naval side. The Admiralty were very unhappy with this situation and in 1924 introduced the term 'Fleet Air Arm' (F.A.A.) for the naval part of the R.A.F. The Royal Navy regained full control of the F.A.A. in 1937 as war became more likely. It then consisted of about 20 squadrons with approximately 300 planes.

Due to the previous starvation of resources the F.A.A. had to rely heavily, in the early years, on the provision of training by the R.A.F. By 1945 there was a global total of over 70000 officers and ratings, about 60 aircraft carriers and 60 air stations. Since then the F.A.A. has continued as a major part of the Royal Navy with worldwide conflicts relying heavily on carrier based air power. In 2004 the F.A.A. has 6200 personnel, 250 aircraft and just two air stations.

# **HISTORY OF THE AIR STATION**

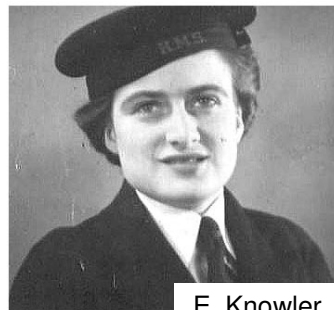


The beginning of the Air Station can be said to have occurred in 1940 when a small armed Army convoy appeared on nearby Whitley Reed and secretly tested the newly introduced 'radar'. Early in 1941 an R.A.F. observation post was set up on Arley Road, Appleton and a dummy airfield was constructed from tea chests filled with sawdust at the end of Cabin Lane on Whitley Reed.

These were in preparation for the construction of an R.A.F. fighter airfield for the defence of the North West. By the 1<sup>st</sup> August enough land (465 acres) had been acquired in Appleton/High Legh to build the airfield.

A continual convoy of small tipper wagons loaded with the rubble from the bombed buildings of Liverpool started filling in the numerous marl pits and laying down foundations. In early 1942 the airfield construction was well under way and bombing was much reduced. The R.A.F. therefore agreed to the loan of the airfield to the Admiralty in exchange for facilities at Macrihanish, Scotland. The observation post was closed down and the dummy airfield moved to Hatton and Naval personnel started to move in. More land was requisitioned for accommodation sites, the W.T. Station and other ancillaries. A system of decoy lights was set up six kilometres south of the airfield, at Budworth Heath. This may have proved its worth when

landmines were dropped nearby and only blew the chimney off a house. The first Wren joined the site at the end of May 1942; she was Betty Barnish of Hatton Cottage, Appleton. She was promptly asked by the Yeoman of Signals to make a Commissioning Pennant.



E. Knowler

As there was no sewing machine available she did it by hand. On the first of June she assembled at the flagpole in front of the Administration Block with the Yeoman, the new Commanding Officer and the Officer of the Day.

The Yeoman hoisted the White Ensign. Betty followed with the Commissioning Pennant and R.N.A.S. Stretton was born. It was christened H.M.S. BLACKCAP by the Admiralty. All naval Air Stations were named after birds. Two reasons have been put forward for calling it 'Stretton' instead of 'Appleton'. One is that it was to avoid confusion with the Appleton at Widnes. The other that a responsible person looked at his map using the given co-ordinates and couldn't see Appleton so he took the nearest place, which was Stretton. The airfield was a sea of mud at this time but after a few weeks the Control Tower was manned and many more personnel had been drafted in.



Courtesy of FAAM

## AIRCRAFT AND ENGINE REPAIR SECTION / STATION FLIGHT 1942



This photograph is unique in being taken in the first year of BLACKCAP's existence. It shows vividly how the Fleet Air Arm was being staffed at that time. The four section officers are all R.N.V.R. officers. There are five R.A.F. personnel in the group, a Warrant Officer, two Sergeants, a Corporal and a Leading Aircraftsman. The Wrens are Air Mechanics and the male ratings are Air Fitters (with collar and tie) up to the rank of Petty Officer and the others are Air Mechanics.

Tree trunks were laid on the runway prior to it becoming operational. This was to deter any possible use by enemy aircraft. The first plane to actually land at Stretton was a Westland Lysander that did so on the grass near the Control Tower.

Combat aircraft in the shape of 3 Seafires and 3 Fairey Fulmars arrived in August.



Seafires overflying HMS Blackcap

B. Nash

These were formed into 897 Squadron under the command of Captain R.C. Hay of the Royal Marines. Thirteen years later he became the Commander (Flying) at BLACKCAP. This squadron was then disbanded in September into 801 and 880 Squadrons. These joined the aircraft carrier ARGUS in October to support the North African landings. 897 was reformed in December with 6 Sea Hurricanes and provided fighter cover for the Salerno landings in September 1943.



Daily Telegraph

Captain Ronnie Hay

Throughout the war years squadrons came from and went to other Air Stations or carriers. The aircraft were repaired, overhauled and modified as necessary and squadrons were disbanded, formed or reformed to make up for losses or to meet the changing needs of the war. Sometimes they came to be re-equipped with new types of aircraft. In total about 30 different squadrons were seen here during these years. Most were fighter squadrons but in 1944 817 and 814 Torpedo Bomber Reconnaissance squadrons were formed at Stretton.

Barracuda  
Torpedo  
bomber



B. Nash



Two of the new Naval Fighter Wings had also been formed, the 15<sup>th</sup> in November 1943 and the 47<sup>th</sup> in January 1944. During the war resident aircraft under the name of 'Station Flight' carried out various duties such as transport, photography and training. There was also a Mobile Aircraft Repair Unit (MARU) that recovered crashed aircraft and brought them back to Stretton on a large articulated lorry nicknamed 'Queen Mary'.

During 1943 Fairey Aviation opened an aircraft repair factory on Wilderspool Causeway, Warrington. These aircraft were then sent to two large company hangars that had been erected on Barleycastle Lane. Fitting out was completed here and then they were test flown before being put back into service. These hangars were vacated after the war and used by the R.N. to store new aircraft of all makes.

To meet the increased demands of the Navy an Aircraft Maintenance Yard (A.M.Y.) was constructed in 1944. It was sited to the northeast of the airfield just off Barleycastle Lane and Grappenhall Lane. It dealt with all aspects of repair to existing aircraft and modifications to new aircraft to Navy specifications.

From 1945 on there were resident Ferry Flights, Pools or Squadrons. Their task was to ferry aircraft from or to all parts of the U.K. and Malta. They had their own aircraft to fetch and carry the ferry pilots, of whom there were as many as twenty.

In 1946 many of the Wrens were discharged, as they were no longer needed. Some were told that the work they had been doing was too heavy for them!



The Aircraft Maintenance Yard

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum



Wren Jennifer James  
shown here in 1945 at  
HMS Blackcap

P. Whincup

1947 saw the formation of the first Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (R.N.V.R.) squadron, 1831. The squadron trained pilots and other personnel as reserves for any future emergency. Widespread recruiting drives were held in 1949 including a flypast over Manchester with several R.A.A.F. squadrons.

A Station Open Day was held in 1950 and Navy Days in 1951, 1953 and 1955. They were very popular with the public as was the admission of locals to the station cinema/theatre that had been allowed for some time.

The last Wren, 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer Beryl M. Jones left Stretton in 1951. She had been billeted in the sick bay in Grappenhall as it was the only suitable accommodation for a sole female. King George VI died in February 1952 and Stretton provided the band for the Warrington memorial ceremony, led by Bandmaster Knowler of the Royal Marines.



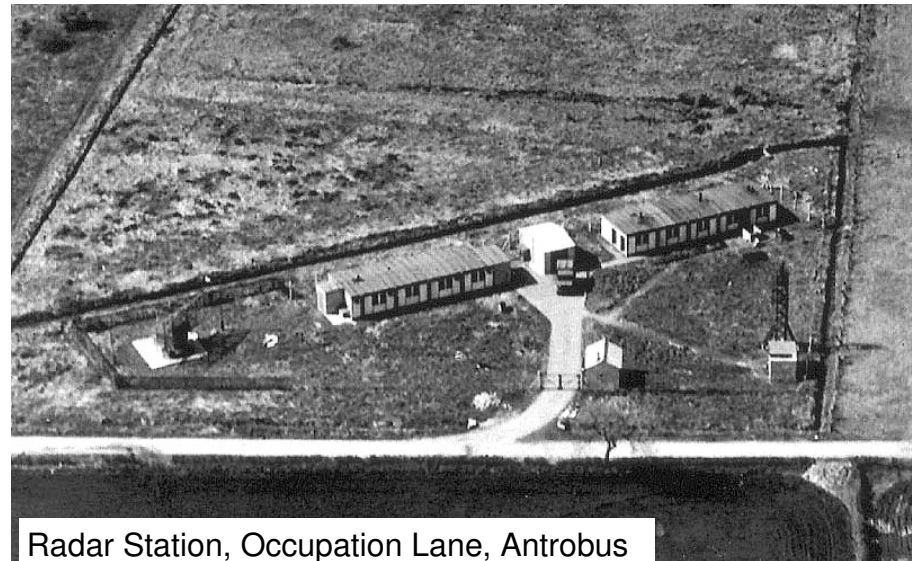
King George VI memorial parade

E. Knowler

His wife, former Wren Betty Barnish had difficulty in finding black material to muffle the drums but she finally tracked some down in Warrington Market.

The Northern Air Division (N.A.D.) of the R.N.V.R. was formed at Stretton on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1952 with 1831 squadron being joined in August by 1841. In September 767 Squadron R.N. arrived and became the Landing Signals Officer (L.S.O.) Training Squadron. This marked the start of several thousand take-offs and landings that tried the patience of the local residents over the next two years.

A joint venture was set up in 1952 between the R.N.A.S. and the Ministry of Civil Aviation to control all aircraft movements at peak times in the North West. After two years of trials and commissioning at the Naval Radar station in Occupation Lane, Antrobus it became operational.



Radar Station, Occupation Lane, Antrobus

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

A major post-war function of the Air Station was the storage of reserve aircraft in various locations around the airfield. These included Mosquitoes, Ansons, Dominies, Tiger Moths, Sea Furies and Wyverns. Many of the surplus aircraft were cocooned on the airfield in a skin of rubber latex to protect them from the weather.

A large number of Seafire MK47s were scrapped in 1957. Some Sea Princes had been taken out of 'mothballs' in 1956 and re-furbished for use. A major landmark was the start of training of R.N.V.R. personnel for jet planes in May 1955. The first such plane was a Sea Vampire arriving in June.



Sea Vampire  
F20 outside the Ex Fairey Aviation Hanger

N. Boulton

The main runway had been lengthened from 4800 feet to 6000 feet around 1953 with a built-in potential to increase it to 9000 feet. This, however, would have required the closure of Arley Road.

A well-publicised event took place on the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1956 when H.R.H. Prince Philip inspected the Station. He had previously seen the N.A.D. lead the flypast for the Queen at the R.N.V.R. Jubilee Review Parade exactly two years previously.



N. Boulton

Duke of Edinburgh next to Commander Hay inspecting the  
Blackcap Gliding Club.

Airman 'Dolly' Gray and AA4 Nev Boulton are on the extreme right .



Early in 1957 the government announced the disbandment of the N.A.D. and it duly happened on 10<sup>th</sup> March, in spite of widespread protest.

Few frontline squadrons came to Stretton after the war, as its main function was the A.M.Y. The last squadron at Stretton was 728B (R.N.) when it reformed there in January 1958 to fly drone (target) aircraft. It flew out to Hal Far, Malta on 17<sup>th</sup> February.



K. Roberts

C.O. Captain James Stopford with the last officers  
at Blackcap in 1958

After several announced closure dates H.M.S. BLACKCAP was officially paid off on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1958 and the site closed on 1<sup>st</sup> December but some accounts remained active for various purposes until 1959.

These were administered by R.N.A.S. Abbotsinch, H.M.S. SANDERLING and Lt. Commander Roberts from there was appointed Officer-in-Charge on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1958. Other sources indicate however that Cdr.(S) B. Ridley was Commanding Officer in 1959.

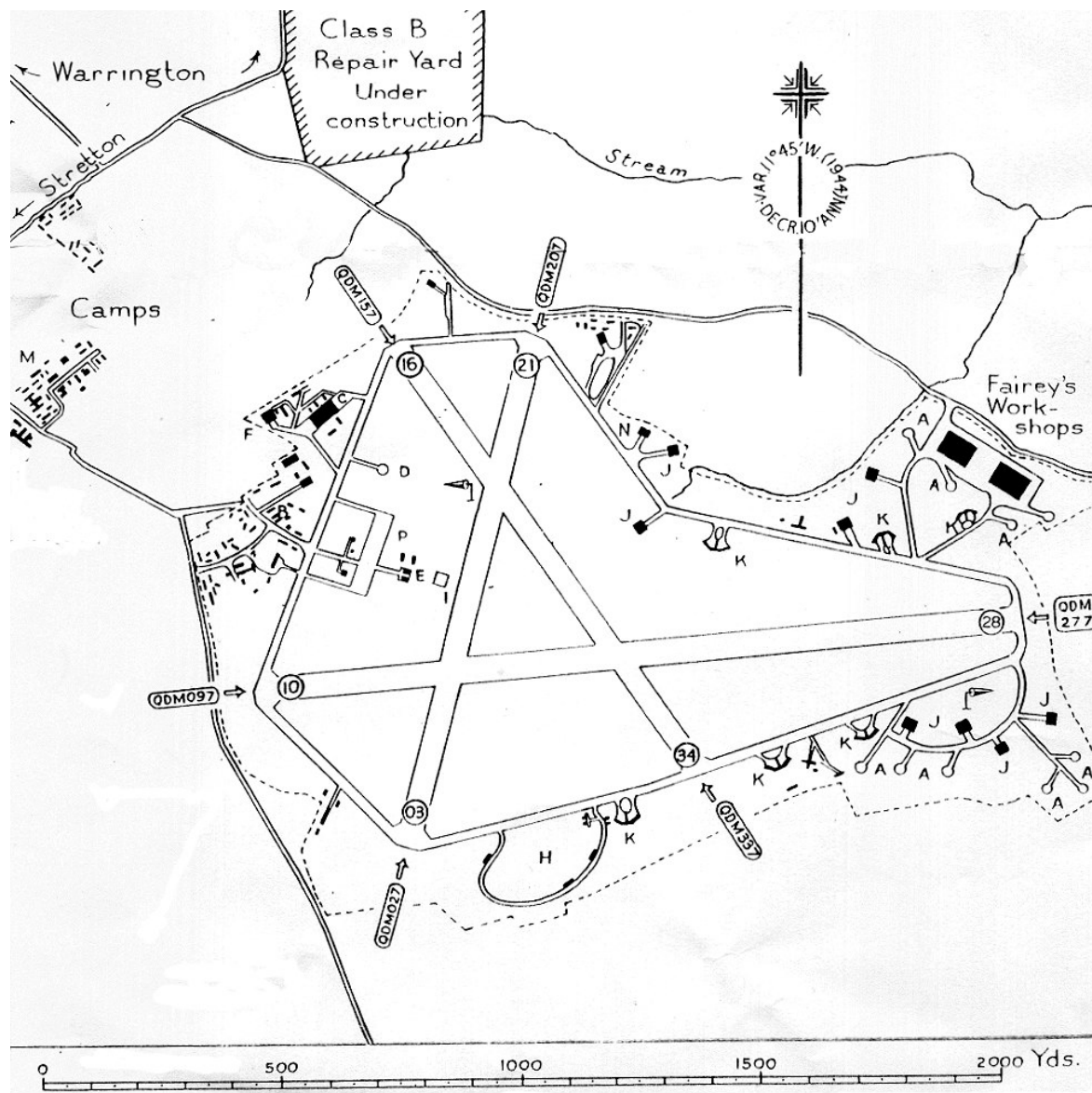
# **AIRFIELD PLANS**

The following pages contain the Airfield plans showing how it changed over the years.

The 1944 plan shows the basic original design layout of the airfield with the Aircraft Maintenance Yard not yet built.

By 1947 one large and two small hangars with connecting roads had been added on the north west corner. Just off Barleycastle Lane to the north the engine test beds are evident with another fuel apron on the perimeter track south east of here. A new building is shown on the edge of the four hangars on the south east corner of the airfield. It has been provisionally identified as one of the Fromson hangars. A turning road is now shown opposite the explosives area.

Changes by 1955 include a small road from the Control Tower to the perimeter track, the designation of the Fairey Workshops as hangars and some more apron in front and some small road additions on the southern perimeter. The major change is the extension of the main runway, dating from about 1953.

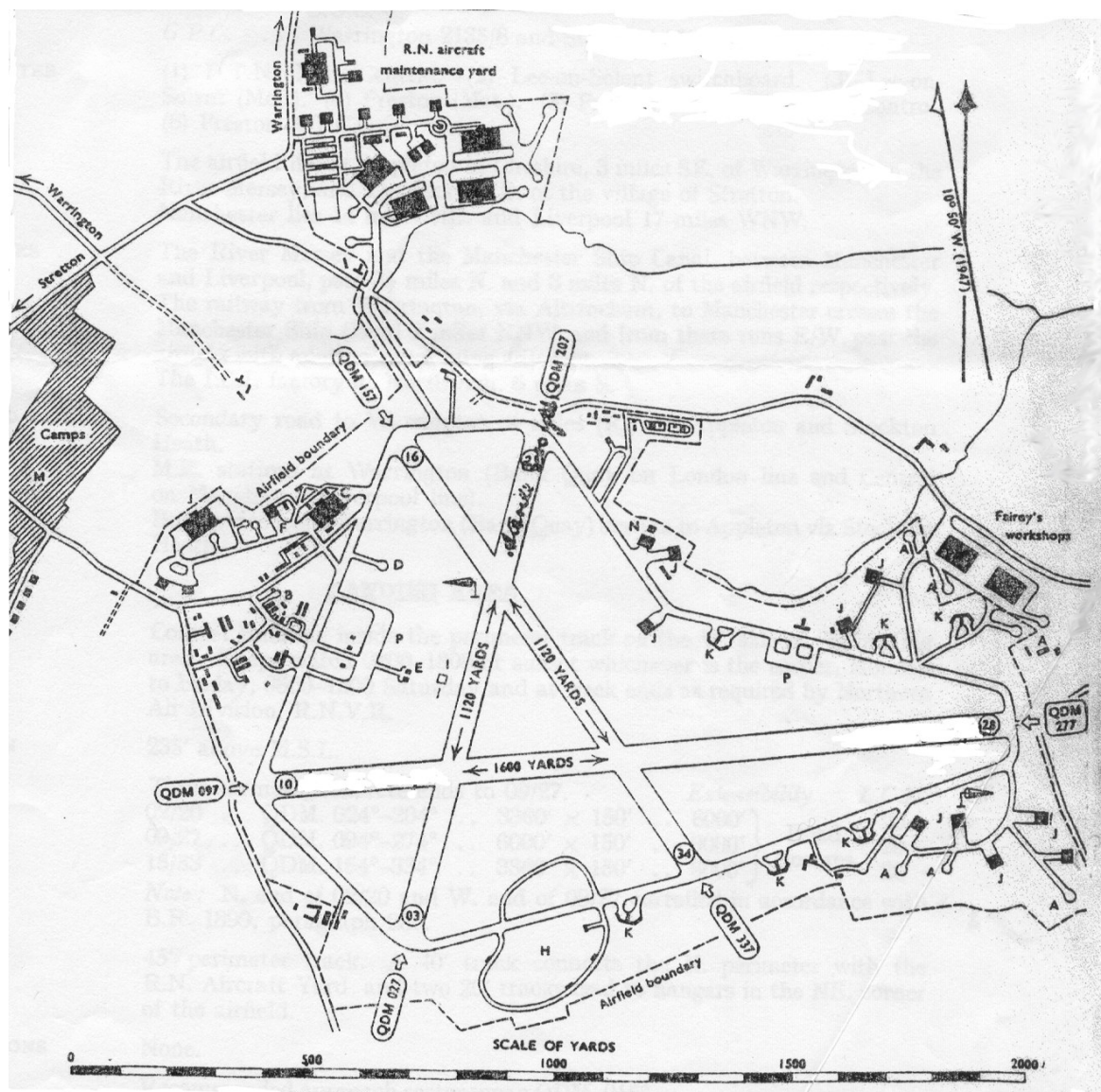


## AIRFIELD PLAN 1944

- A. Aircraft standings
- B. Armoury
- C. A.R.S. hangar
- D. Compass base
- E. Control building
- F. E.R.S. hangar
- G. Equip & Erect hangar
- H. Explosives area
- I. Ground signals
- J. Hangars
- K. Pens
- L. Radar test base
- M. Sick Bay
- N. Test butt
- O. Workshop
- P. Fuel: apron

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

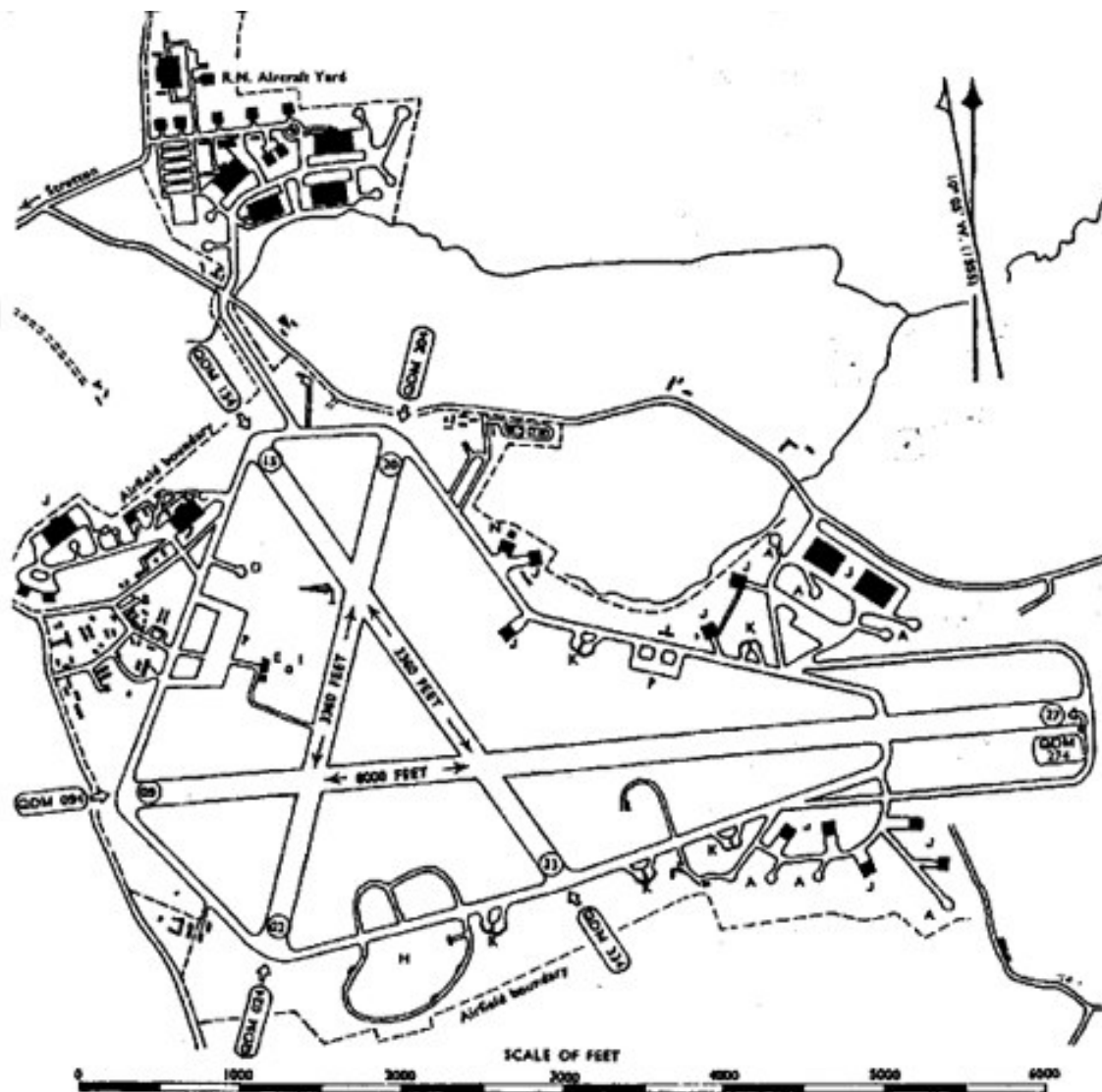




## AIRFIELD PLAN 1947

- A. Aircraft standings
- B. Armoury
- C. A.R.S. hangar
- D. Compass base
- E. Control building
- F. E.R.S. hangar
- G. Equip & Erect hangar
- H. Explosives area
- I. Ground signals
- J. Hangars
- K. Pens
- L. Radar test base
- M. Sick Bay
- N. Test butt
- O. Workshop
- P. Fuel: apron

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum



## AIRFIELD PLAN 1955

- A. Aircraft standings
- B. Armoury
- C. A.R.S. hangar
- D. Compass base
- E. Control building
- F. E.R.S. hangar
- G. Equip & Erect hangar
- H. Explosives area
- I. Ground signals
- J. Hangars
- K. Pens
- L. Radar test base
- M. Sick Bay
- N. Test butt
- O. Workshop
- P. Fuel: apron

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum



# **ARCHITECTURE AND BUILDINGS**

# ARCHITECTURE AND BUILDINGS

## RUNWAYS

The layout of these is shown on the various plans. It indicates its R.A.F. origin in having only three runways as opposed to the four of standard Royal Navy design. The original runways were all tarmac surfacing.



Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

The main runway runs east to west and was designated 09/27 from its bearings. There was a traffic control wagon to prevent collisions between aircraft and vehicles at the west end where it almost meets Arley Road. In the early 1950s this runway was lengthened from 4796 feet to 6011 feet to accommodate jet aircraft.

The extension and adjoining perimeter tracks were constructed in concrete. It was essential to keep the runways free of excessive rainwater. To this end the main runway has a camber to each side that drains off into a 1.2m wide gutter. There are grids every 50m or so that take the water down about 2.5m to a 250mm drainage pipe. Every 130m there is an inspection/maintenance manhole to the side of the gutter. This drainage system is probably the cause of the flooding nowadays on the former perimeter track, now a public road. The main runway is intact for the whole of its original length. A section is fenced off at the east end where the Shell/police skid pan was and there is a low bund wall and recovery system for oily water.



Extended perimeter on left

D. Enfield

Approach lighting in a 4° fan was also installed with crossbars of lights every 500 feet. This extension completely severed Crowley Lane and there was a police point near Pennypleck House to prevent access. A tarmac footpath across the fields was provided for pedestrians to get to Swineyard Lane. After closure of the station a large white cross was painted on the main runway. This was to denote that it was no longer in use.



The M56 bisected the north/south runways, 02/20 and 15/33, in July 1975. Shell Research used the main runway and connecting perimeter track as a circuit for testing oils and fuels in cars from 1961 to 2002. For a period it was also used for training police drivers in high-speed chase work.

## HANGARS

During its early years the airfield had a complement of just 10 hangars. There was a large (185' x 105') Callender Hamilton hangar that was used for aircraft repairs and storage (the A.R.S. hangar).



Callender Hamilton hangar

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

Just to the west of it was a small (60' x 70') hangar supplied by A.J. Main of Glasgow. This was used for engine repairs (the E.R.S. hangar).



On the southeast and northeast perimeter tracks there were 8 (60' x 70') hangars, 4 Mains and 4 Type J by the Teeside Bridge and Engineering Co.



Ex R.N.V.R. hangars in industrial use 2004

D. Enfield

When the airfield closed the perimeter hangars were dismantled and sold to private companies e.g. one to Southern's at Widnes.

In 1945 the construction of the Aircraft Maintenance Yard (A.M.Y.) had taken the total to 23 hangars (8 Mains and 5 Pentads added) and by 1947 two more Mains and a large (187' x 112') Pentad hangar had been erected for use by the R.N.V.R. squadrons.



Pentad from entrance to A.M.Y.

J Buie



Ex A.M.Y. Main hangar in use 2003

D. Enfield

Two large A1 Type Ministry of Aircraft Production hangars were provided in 1943 for finishing aircraft from the Fairey Aviation repair factory on Wilderspool Causeway, Warrington. The acquisition by the Navy of these two Fairey Aviation hangars after the war brought the station total to 28. A facilities list of 1953 included three Fromson hangars, two of which were listed as test butts q.v. These were not classed as hangars however by the Admiralty Engineers on a station plan of 1955.



Fairey Aviation hangars in use as warehouses 2003

E. Haworth

## CONTROL TOWER

The Control Tower was built in 1941 to R.A.F. design. The latter is indicated by the fact that it was only two storeys whereas most Royal Navy Towers were of four storeys. The small tower on top was often defined as the Watch Office because a watch was kept from there. It was built of concrete or wood. The life of this building is depicted in this series of photographs.



Under Construction

R Smith



Control Tower Staff in the 1950s

R Smith



Derelict Control Tower

J Buie

## DISPERSAL PENS

Dispersal pens were used to disperse aircraft around the airfield, away from buildings and protect them from the effects of blast from bombs.

It was normal R.A.F. practice to provide six pens holding two aircraft each on a fighter station. A central earth wall between the two planes and two outer walls provided the blast protection. The six at Stretton had outer cranked walls 80 feet long, a centre wall of 60 feet and a distance of about 55 feet between the centre and outer tips.

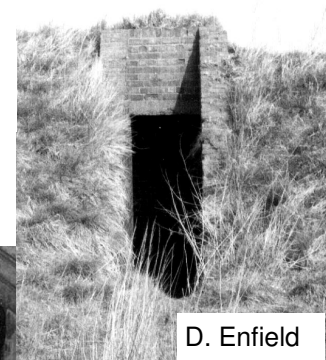
The floors of the pens were of tarmac and were thicker in the centre to take the weight of the plane through its undercarriage. At the junction of the walls was a concrete arched-section shelter, 15' x 7', to accommodate 25 crew, air mechanics or others in the event of an air raid. Two pens remain virtually intact but overgrown. Their most recent occupants were sheep.



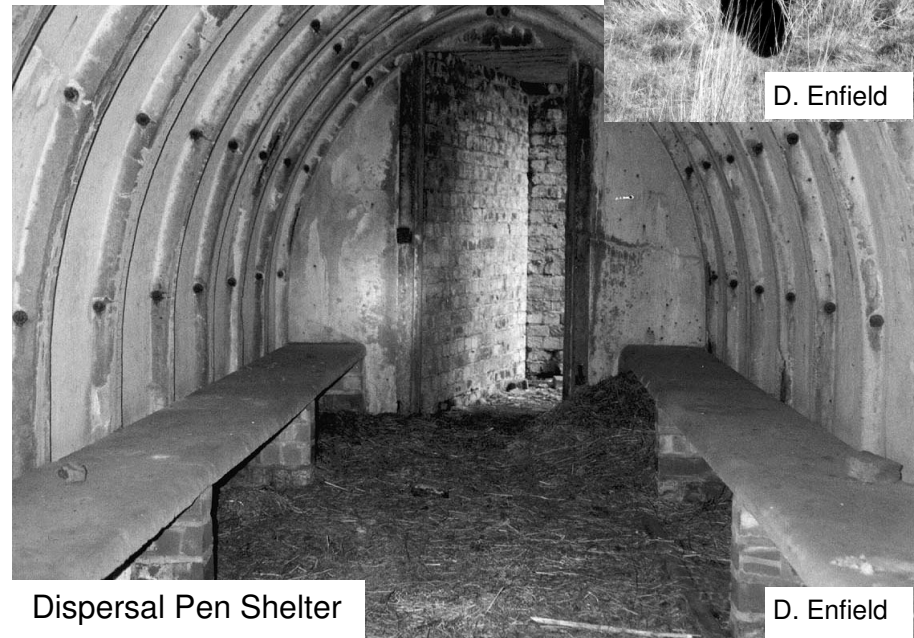
Overgrown Dispersal Pen 2004

D. Enfield

Escape route  
from Pen Shelter



D. Enfield

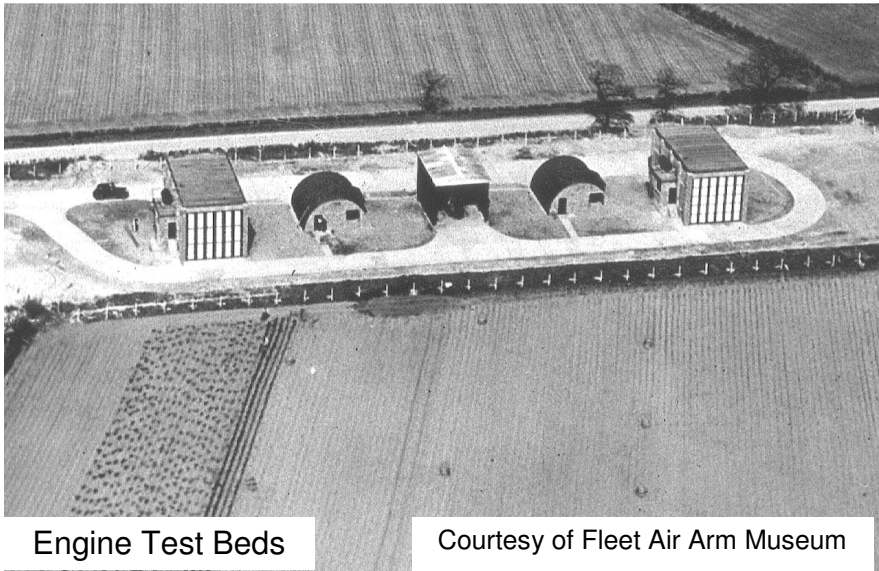


Dispersal Pen Shelter

D. Enfield

## ENGINE TEST BEDS

These beds were situated just off Barleycastle Lane before Barleycastle Farm when coming from the A.M.Y. The foundations are still (2003) visible. It is said that the engine noise could be heard in Grappenhall Village.



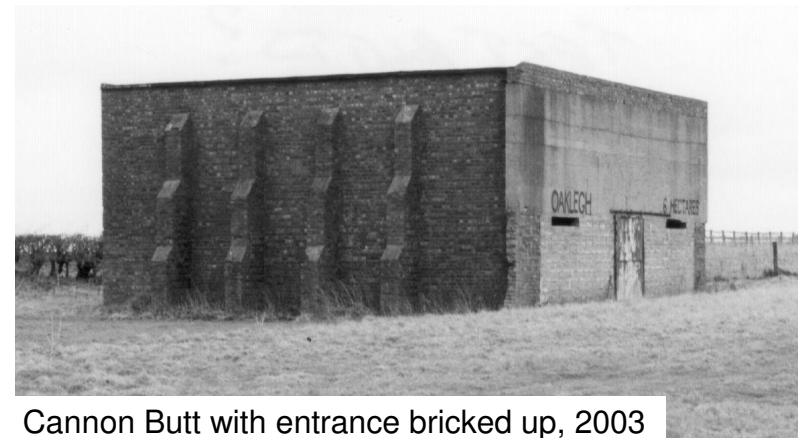
Engine Test Beds

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

## BUTTS

There were two types of butts on the station. Rifle butts and aircraft cannon butts. The former was a 30 yard outdoor range for .303 training and practice. There was also a 25 yard indoor .22 range that was very popular on Navy Days. The cannon butts were used to test the cannons of aircraft in situ. They were filled with water or sand that had to be sieved periodically to recover the shell heads.

The aircraft was normally positioned and anchored down in an open-ended blister hangar (a Fromson) at a distance from the butt. It appears that the use of these butts was not very high.



Cannon Butt with entrance bricked up, 2003

D. Enfield



Cannon Butt in use at another Air Station.

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

## EXPLOSIVES AREA

This area was on the southern perimeter of the airfield, some distance away from other buildings, for obvious reasons. It could hold ammunition, torpedoes and bombs but the extent of its use is not known. The photo shows a nearby surviving building that seems to have contained office, messing, toilet and sleeping facilities. Its function was possibly to control the issue of explosives and their security or it could have been a squadron office.

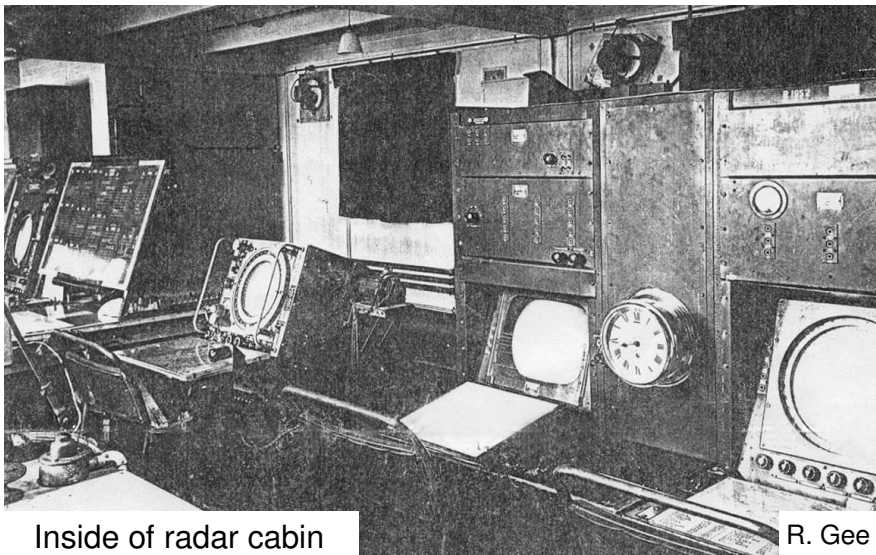


D Enfield

## RADAR STATION (G.C.I. Site)

The radar station was built at Antrobus in 1941 with the electrics and instruments being installed by G.E. Taylor & Co. Ltd. of London. Its wartime use and immediately after is unknown, it was regarded as top secret by those aware of its existence.

In late 1952 it was modified for use by Blackcap's Air Traffic Control to ensure the safety of flights into and out of Stretton. The equipment in use was a R.A.F. Type AMES (Air Ministry Experimental Set) 15 and a R.N. Type 277T. Other active airfields in the vicinity of Stretton included Speke (Liverpool Airport), Ringway and Burtonwood (U.S. Military Air Transport HQ).

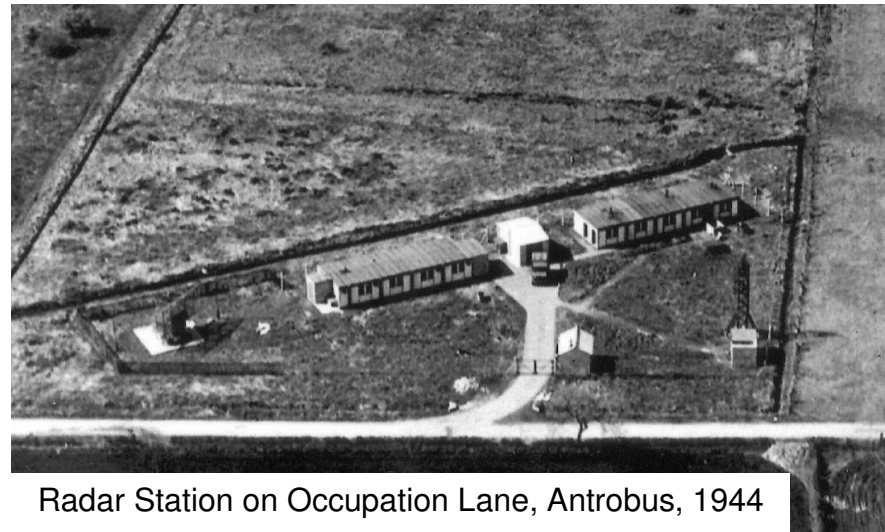


Inside of radar cabin

R. Gee

At that time a Manchester Control Zone was in operation with Ministry of Civil Aviation Zone controllers located at Ringway. Northern Air Traffic Control Centre at Broughton near Preston maintained an Area Control.

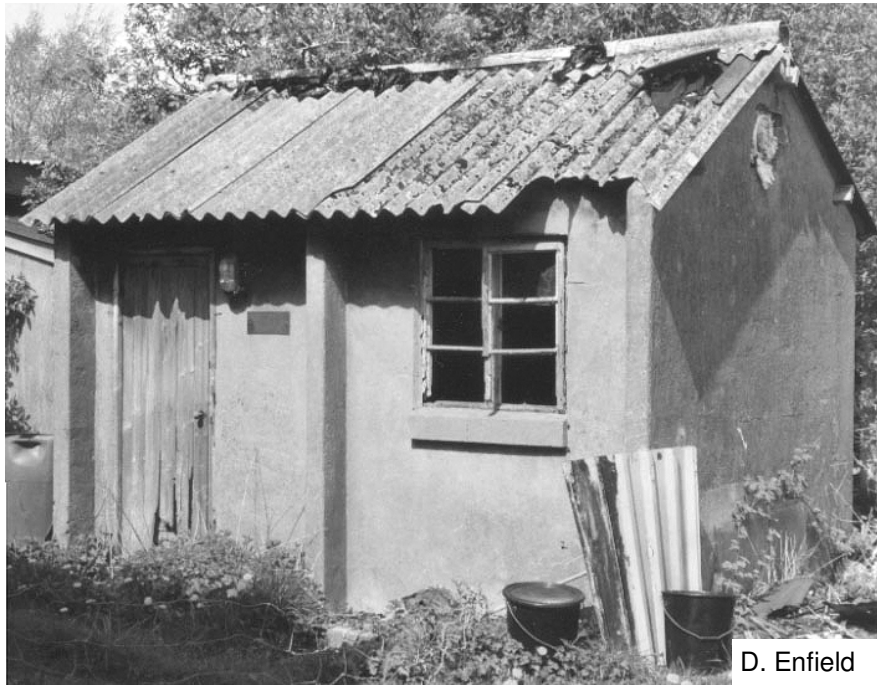
On 13<sup>th</sup> February 1953 trials commenced at Antrobus under Lieutenant J.R. Gee with a view to controlling all naval traffic. A few weeks later after some 1500 sorties it was also providing a service to military aircraft through the zone. The use of the facility was then offered to the Ministry of Civil Aviation. It duly commenced its own trials early in 1954 with a team from Manchester led by Mr I.M. Lucas. At 0745 on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> June 1954 the unit became operational, controlling civil and military aircraft at peak periods. It was the first Joint Air Traffic Control Radar Unit and became known as Northern Radar..



Radar Station on Occupation Lane, Antrobus, 1944

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum





D. Enfield

These pictures show the Radar Station in 2004. Until recently they were the working part of Wildacre Farm.

Left is the original gatehouse.

In the background of lower left are the buildings seen in the 1944 aerial photo.

Lower right is the 1953 Northern Radar cabin.



D. Enfield

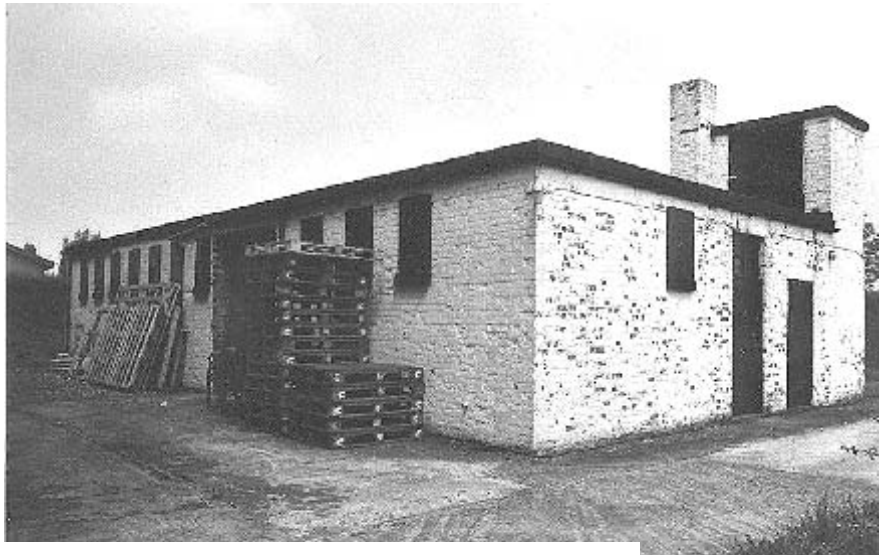


D. Enfield

## TELEPHONE EXCHANGE

On the Station Map of 1955 this is referred to as the P.C.B. which is interpreted as the Public Communications Block by some former personnel. It was variously referred to by others as the PABX, Communications Centre and Signals Dept.. These differences are probably explained by the fact that the block contained the switchboard, teleprinters, Signals Office with Telegraphists, a Yeoman of Signals and a W.R.N.S. Cipher Officer

The photographs show the effect of its conversion to a cattery in later life. Currently it is used for storage.



Rear of PCB / Telephone Exchange 2004

D. Enfield

## W/T (Wireless Telegraphy) TRANSMITTER

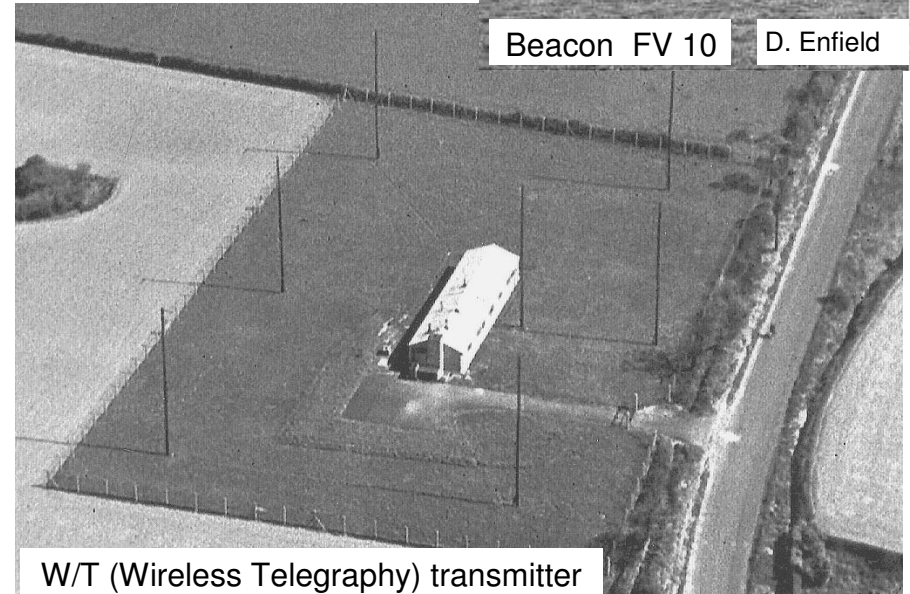
This was situated off to the right on New Lane just before the junction with Lumbrook Lane. There was a V.H.F. receiver with an eighty feet high timber tower in the fields 450m northwest of the transmitter.

Additionally there was a beacon (FV 10 Site) 1300m to the northeast, off Broad Lane, Grappenhall.



Beacon FV 10

D. Enfield



W/T (Wireless Telegraphy) transmitter

Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

## R.N.V.R. CLUBHOUSE

This is the only surviving brick building that is in good condition and in daily use. It was also used as a crèche on the Navy Days.



D. Enfield

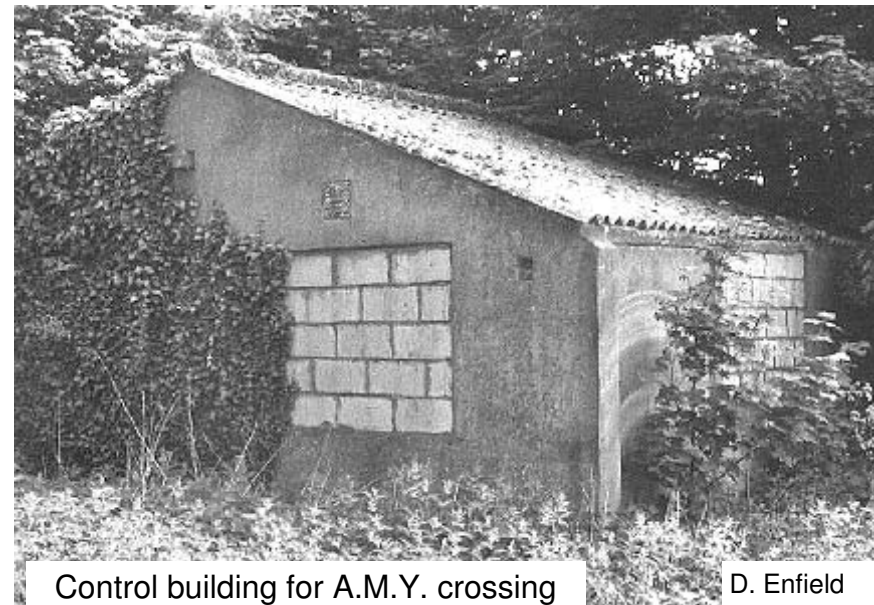


D. Enfield

Clubhouse and  
associated water tower

## CROSSING POINT TO AIRCRAFT MAINTENANCE YARD

Aircraft were towed or taxied along 'Burma Road' from the airfield to the Aircraft Maintenance Yard and vice versa. This necessitated crossing Barleycastle Lane. A control was therefore instituted for safety and security and manned by Admiralty Police. It has survived because it is now on the edge of a field and not on the developed part of the airfield. For some reason it has been bricked up to prevent misuse rather than being demolished.



Control building for A.M.Y. crossing

D. Enfield

## EMERGENCY GENERATOR HOUSE

Again this is standing in a field and is just outside the airfield boundary on the 1955 layout plan. It is presumed from its internal construction to have housed a generator, most likely for the nearby approach lighting.



D. Enfield

Generator House  
and  
Generator Base



D. Enfield

## ARRIVAL AND DISPERSAL INSPECTION (A.D.I.) BLOCK

This derelict building is standing in Birchels Gorse close to hangar 16. There is some hardstanding across the perimeter track where aircraft were parked whilst awaiting inspection.



D. Enfield

## EMERGENCY WATER SUPPLY TANK

There appear to have been 9 or 10 of these tanks around the station. They were situated in high fire risk areas such as living accommodation and near hangars. This survivor is on the south side of the runways close to the former site of hangers 20 to 23. It is lined with bitumen or rubber and is in good condition.



D. Enfield

# **ACCOMMODATION**



## MALE ACCOMMODATION

On the 1955 plan there were five different sites altogether, mainly for the accommodation of single males. The construction and naming seems to have been a gradual process with some interchange of names over time. To distinguish them they were given the names of aircraft carriers. All these carriers had been lost on active service early in the war. Presumably the sites were dedicated in memory of those who died. The following details are a sobering reminder of the cost involved

H.M.S. ARK ROYAL Torpedoed 13/5/41, sank next day.

1 lost out of 1580

H.M.S. COURAGEOUS Torpedoed by U-29 on 19/9/39.

518 lost of 1260

H.M.S. EAGLE Torpedoed by U-73 on 11/8/42.

160 lost of 988

H.M.S. HERMES Sunk 9/4/42 by Japanese aircraft off Ceylon. No details

H.M.S. GLORIOUS Sunk by Scharnhorst and Gneisenau 8/6/40. Most of crew lost

### ARK ROYAL SITE

This site was the largest and was located on the east side of Arley Road where the Young Offenders Institution (Y.O.I.) now stands. As well as accommodation it contained the main welfare services of the station as shown on the photograph on the next page.

Approximately 100 Petty Officers (P.O.s) had their Mess, living quarters and ablutions block on this site. There were five huts used as living quarters and known as A, B, C, D and E Messes. This terminology can be confusing to non-naval personnel as there was also the 'P.O.s' Mess'. This was a building that was similar to a clubhouse and contained bar, snooker tables, piano, library etc. The ablutions block was linked by corridor to the Messes and contained toilets, washbasins and showers, Dhobi (clothes washing facility) and drying rooms. The block was cleaned by civilians, known by the P.O.s as 'Gobbies'.

Not only were the Petty Officers close to the various services but also to the Thorn public house and the Church. Not surprisingly the former was the most visited venue.



P.O.s quarters and rear of cinema from Spen Farm, Arley Road

## ARK ROYAL SITE

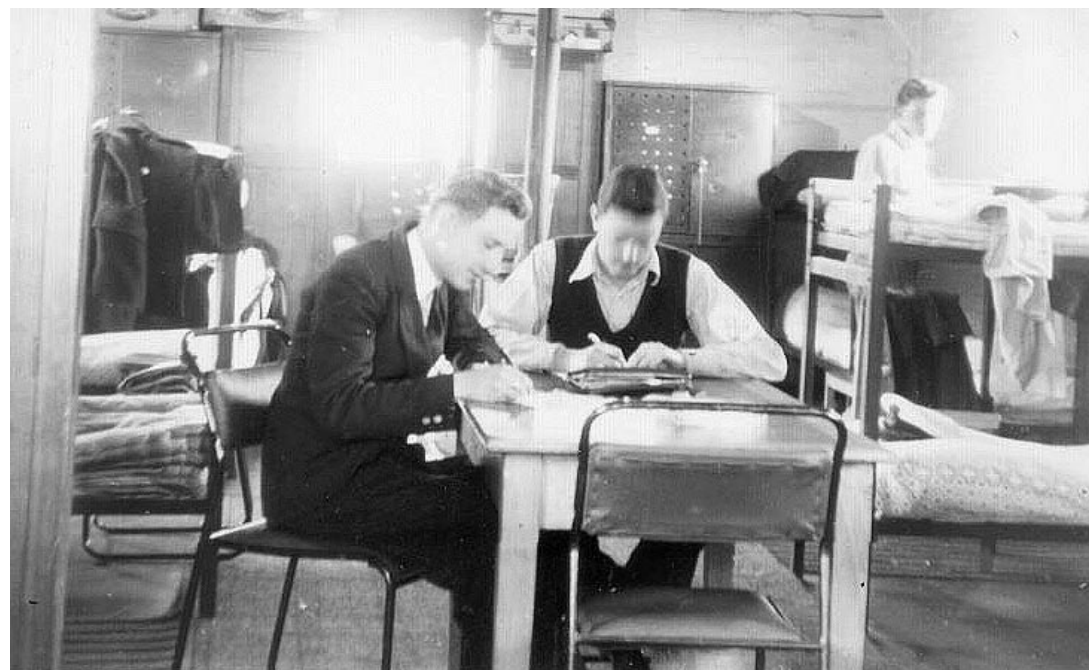


Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

- |  |   |                             |                     |
|--|---|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| 1 - Dining Room                                    | 2 - Galley                                    | 3 - Dining Room             | 4 - Police Office ? |
| 5 - Regulating Office / Guardroom                  | 6 - Guardroom                                 | 7 - N.A.A.F.I.              |                     |
| 8 - C.of E. Church                                 | 9 - Rum Issue                                 | 10 - P.O.'s Mess            | 11 - Mess President |
| 12 to 16 - P.O.'s living messes, A, B, C, D, and E |   | 17 - P.O.'s Ablutions Block |                     |
| 18 - Coal compound                                 | 19 - Sick Bay, Victualling, Photographic area |                             |                     |
| 20 - Tobacco issue                                 | 21 - Slops                                    | 22 - Regulating mess        |                     |
| Note:- these may have changed over the years       |   |                             |                     |



Tony Perrett at entrance  
to P.O.s Mess



Inside `E` Mess



Reg Linford, Tony Perrett outside ablutions block on an AJS  
Motorcycle

All photos—A. Perrett

## HERMES SITE



Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

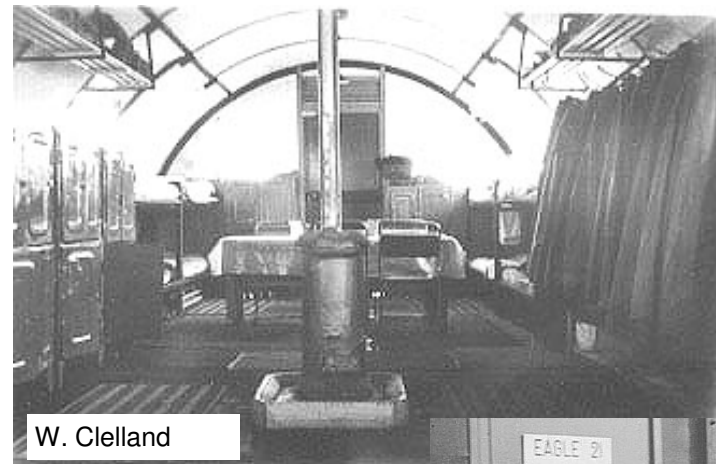
This site was on the opposite side of Arley Road to 'Ark Royal'. It contained the Chief Petty Officers' (C.P.O.s) Mess and Quarters, the Wardroom and Officers' Quarters and separate dining rooms. This effectively segregated the senior N.C.O.s and Officers from all other ranks. There was capacity for about 100 Officers and 20 C.P.O.s but the number varied with the ship's complement over the years and how many were in married accommodation.

## EAGLE SITE



Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

Although this backed on to and connected with 'Ark Royal' there was an entrance to it from Grappenhall Lane. The gates are still there between Crofton Close and Yew Tree Close and lead on to the Y.O.I. playing fields. The living quarters were Nissen huts but had the luxury of covered walkways between them and the ablutions. Approximately 250 ratings could be accommodated here.



'central heating' in E25 mess.

W. Clelland

Air Mechanic Austin Lask  
second from left  
outside Eagle 21



G. Rose

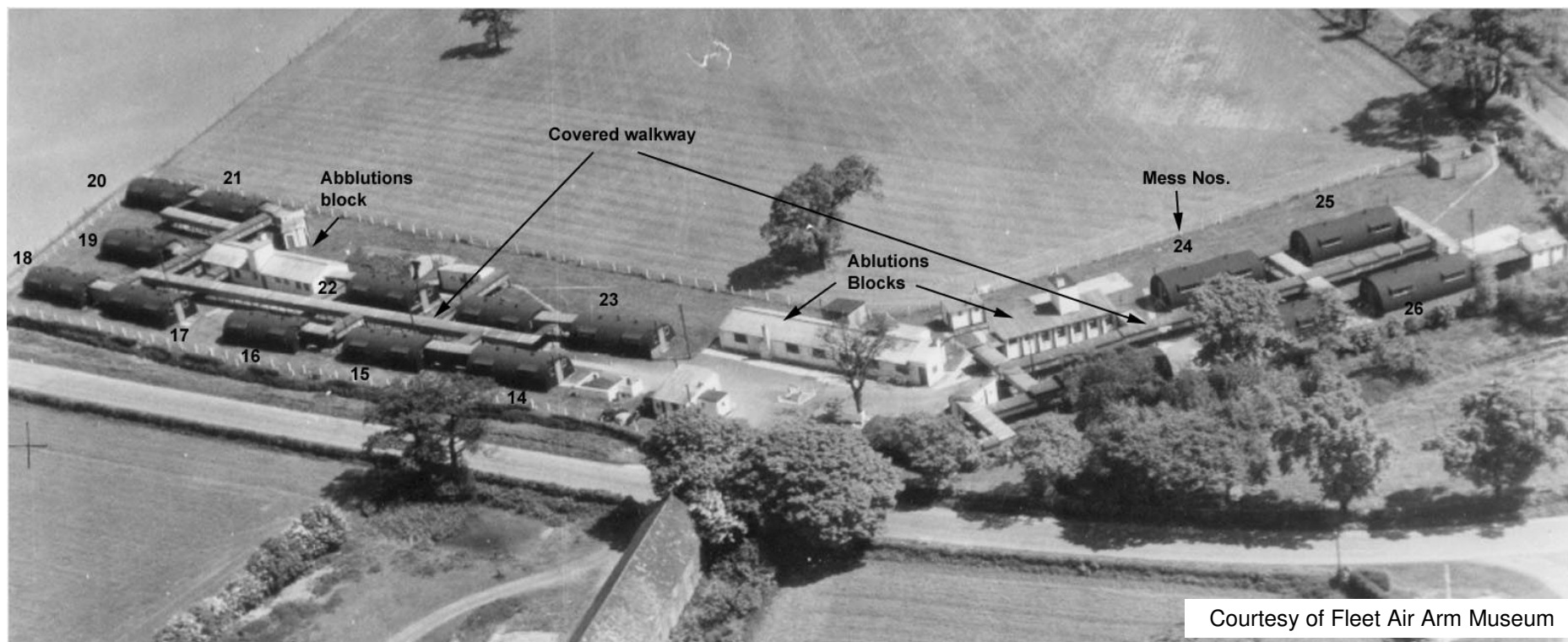


## **COURAGEOUS SITE**

'Courageous' was located on Pepper Street starting from its junction with Stretton Road. There was accommodation for about 300 ratings in Nissen huts with a Leading Hand in charge of each Mess. Two Emergency Water Supply tanks are clearly identifiable on the photo.

The site was shared with the station hockey and football pitches and associated dressing rooms etc. The prefabs, top left, were occupied by civilians.





## GLORIOUS SITE

The name could have been allocated to this site because of its close proximity to the Thorn pub or the church or both. Again the Nissen huts for up to 400 men were provided with covered walkways making the return trip especially more favourable in foul weather.



Ablutions block on  
'Glorious' site

D. Perry



Inside one of the Nissen huts



## **WOMENS' ROYAL NAVAL SERVICE (W.R.N.S.) ACCOMMODATION**

Two country mansions were requisitioned for housing the W.R.N.S.

### **Grappenhall Heyes**

This was built in 1830 by the Parr family, bankers in Warrington, as part of the estate they created. It was located off the east side of Lumbrook Lane about half a mile before the Bridgewater Canal.

It has been described by former Wren, Caroline Lawrence (née Bowey), as 'magnificent'. Apparently the gallery around the hall inside was lined with stuffed birds of all sorts. As far as possible the furniture and fabric were protected from damage. Unfortunately this did not go far enough to mitigate the effects of a beer barrel being rolled down the stairs one night by some of the young occupants.

About 50 Wrens could be accommodated, including some officers and the Regulating (disciplinary) C.P.O., the Quarters P.O. and other P.O.s. To get to their various duties on the station they used naval transport, bicycles or buses from Warrington.

The house was vacated in 1949 and sold by the Parr family in 1951 to the Road Haulage Executive. In 1975 it was purchased by Warrington Borough Council but had to be demolished. In 2003 the land is covered in 3-storey 'luxury' houses and the only significant feature of the past is the restored walled garden.



Warrington Guardian

## Grappenhall Hall

This still stands in extensive grounds on the south side of Church Lane in Grappenhall village. It was able to house around 30 Wrens who were transported to the air station daily. It was purchased in 1943 by Cheshire County Council to use as a special school for children. This did not happen until 1958, presumably because the Admiralty still held it. It is now financed and run by Warrington B.C.



P. Whincup

Wyn ?José Littlejohns and Betty Lloyd Dodd  
February 1946



J.Kerr



J.Kerr

There were also periods when Wrens were accommodated on other sites. Pamela Whincup (née Jones) was first at the Heyes but then was transferred to Cabin 5 on 'Ark Royal'. Life was not too comfortable there. Cold water dripped off the roof of the bath houses on to the girls in the bath. There were several cases of jaundice in 1945 followed by outbreaks of measles and infectious hepatitis. Some of the illness was put down to frequent meals of under-cooked toad-in-the-hole. After this she and others were sent to live at the Hall.



P. Whincup

Jean ?, Joan Anthony and Kay Jones  
outside Cabin 5, 1945

## MARRIED QUARTERS

In general you had to be over 25 to get married quarters and allowances. The Admiralty had 99 houses built in 1950 in Bridge Lane, Dale Lane and Wood Lane for personnel from Stretton. These were for all ranks but many of the senior officers found detached houses in various locations.

Commander Gilchrist, the R.N.V.R. C.O. lived in Pennypleck House in Pennypleck Lane, Antrobus for a while. This latter house was the one that Prince Philip stayed in during his visit on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1956. Another officer lived at Cliff Lane Farm until 1950. Houses were also built on the lane to Yew Tree Farm for the most senior officers; they included one for the Commanding Officer of BLACKCAP.

There were also a few caravans near 'Courageous' site that were used by married personnel and some found lodgings in civilian houses.



D. Enfield

Officers' houses in Dale Lane.  
( Lt. R. Gee lived at No. 6 Wood Lane 1952 to 1955)



D. Enfield

Other ranks' housing in Bridge Lane



D. Enfield

Senior Officers' houses in Yew Tree Close

## **‘IMMOBILES’**

Anyone who lived ashore i.e. in their normal civilian home was known as an ‘Immobile’.

Local girls who were in the W.R.N.S. were commonly in this category; they were paid 4d less per day than those ‘on board’ and had their own mess and cook.

## **SICK PERSONNEL**

There was a Sick Bay on ‘Ark Royal’ site. In civilian terms it would have been called a surgery or medical centre. The main Sick Bay was established in a large house in Grappenhall called Springfield. A bungalow now stands on the site on Broad Lane, opposite the cricket club. Its function was to care for those too sick or injured to work.

Serious cases were tended in local hospitals, including Winwick, Rainhill and Seaforth while some operations were carried out at R.A.F. Padgate.

The Sick bay was staffed by a Medical Officer, a Dental Officer, two Queen Alexandra R.N. Nursing Service sisters, several V.A.D. (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurses and ambulance drivers. Some of the nurses were quartered at Arley Hall.



Springfield

# **AIRCRAFT**



Many aircraft were seen at R.N.A.S. Stretton over the 16 years of its life. Some were only seen once or twice others were resident for varying periods. Quite a number of aircraft landed or nearly landed by mistake, thinking it was Burtonwood or Ringway. A few made emergency landings. During the war most of the aircraft were those in current use with the squadrons and this tended to limit the variety. With the construction of the A.M.Y. the need was to supply planes for many different uses. Many types were brought in for modification, storage and scrapping.

There was a certain amount of 'leisure' traffic, sometimes using naval planes. Some stopped at Stretton for refuelling on there way down south for the weekend. A significant number appeared whenever there was a Test Match at Old Trafford.

As cameras were not allowed on site during the war all our photographs are post-war. Pictures of the aircraft can be found in the many books available on the subject.

In the following section the name of the plane with model numbers where known, its maker, when it was reported as seen at Stretton and a typical maximum speed. These together with a brief description, in most cases, are intended to give the general reader some feel for the aircraft and its uses.

**ALBACORE.** Fairey. 1942/1943. 160 m.p.h.  
Introduced in 1940 as replacement for Swordfish. Withdrawn by end of 1943 due to unreliable engine and other problems.



Avro Anson Ferry Squadron 1947

J. Buie

**ANSON 19.** Avro. 1948/1952. 190 m.p.h.  
Entered service with R.A.F. in 1936. Used in Coastal Command during war and for training after.

**ARGUS FLYING BOXCAR.** Fairchild, U.S.A. 1953/1954  
A large American transport that was only just prevented from landing at Stretton by warning flares.



**ATTACKER.** Vickers Supermarine. 1953/1957 590 m.p.h.  
The first frontline jet of the Royal Navy it was developed from the prototype Spiteful which was supposed to have been a replacement for the Spitfire.



**Avengers over Malta 1956**

R. Williams



**Auster V TJ 704 1831 SQN/NAD  
Communications Aircraft at Stretton**

R. Williams

**AUSTER V.** Taylorcraft. 1948/1949 130 m.p.h.  
This was used as a communications aircraft by 1831 R.N.V. R. squadron and apparently was one of only seven in the R.N. post-war.



A.Taylor

**AVENGER.** Grumman, U.S.A. 1953/1954. 270 m.p.h.  
A three-seat torpedo bomber with the power and strength needed by the Fleet Air Arm in 1943 to operate from carriers.



B. Nash

**BARRACUDA.** Fairey. 1943/1952 230m.p.h.  
Came into service in 1943 to replace the Albacore and Swordfish. Formed into torpedo bomber reconnaissance (TBR) squadrons it could also carry mines, depth charges and bombs. It was most famously used in the bombing raids against the TIRPITZ moored in a Norwegian fiord in spring/summer of 1944.

**CANBERRA.** English Electric 1954/1956 620 m.p.h.  
Probably seen in air display on a Navy Day

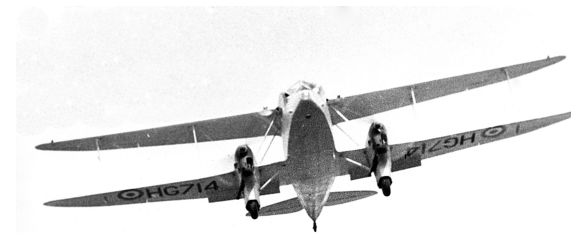
**CORSAIR.** Vought, U.S.A. 1943/1952 400 m.p.h.  
A very good fighter that was at first rejected by the U.S. Navy but put into use by the R.N. Later used at Iwo Jima, Okinawa and in the Suez war.



W. Clelland

**DAKOTA.** Douglas, U.S.A. 1948/1949 230 m.p.h.  
These often mistook Stretton for Burtonwood but were also used in the F.A.A. at this time for transport and communications.

**DEFIANT.** Boulton Paul. 1943/1945. 300 m.p.h.  
Was a fairly successful R.A.F. two-seater fighter with power operated turret in 1941 but was then found to be vulnerable to attack from the front and below. Withdrawn from action and used for fighter training, target towing and air-sea rescue.



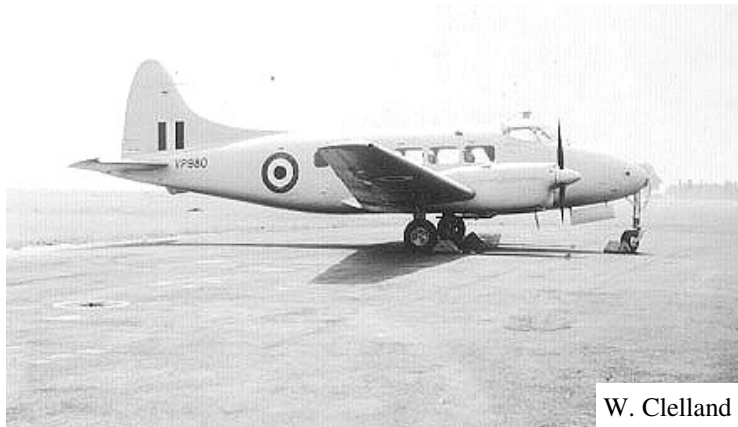
DOMINIE landing at Stretton

A.Taylor



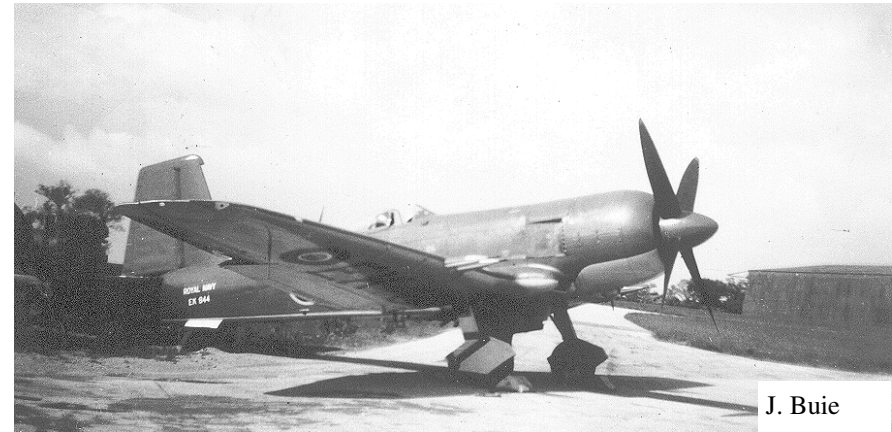
B. Nash

**DOMINIE.** de Havilland. 1944/1954 150 m.p.h.  
Also known as the Dragon Rapide it was used primarily for ferrying personnel



W. Clelland

**DOVE.** de Havilland. 1948/1949 210 m.p.h.  
This military version of the 8-seater civilian aircraft was used for transport and communications.



J. Buie

**FIREBRAND 4.5.** Blackburn. 1948/1950 350 m.p.h.  
introduced to FAA in 1945 as a single seater torpedo fighter-bomber.



W. Clelland

**FIREFLY 1=5.** Fairey. 1947/1954. 320 m.p.h.  
A two-man fighter introduced into service in 1943. It was involved in the attacks on the TIRPITZ and later joined the British Pacific Fleet using rockets in Sumatra and Japan.

**FULMAR. Fairey.** 1943/1945. 280 m.p.h.  
Developed by modification of a prototype day bomber into a two-seater fighter. Was in action against the Italian air force in defence of the Malta convoys in 1941. It became vulnerable to superior German aircraft in the Greek campaign due to its lack of rear-firing guns. It was superseded by the Firefly in 1943 and gradually relegated to second line duties.

**GANNET. Fairey.** 1954/1955 280 m.p.h.  
An anti submarine turboprop with 3 crew



**HARVARD.** North American. 1949/1953 210 m.p.h.  
A two-seater plane that was used as a combat trainer by almost all the second line squadrons.



**DRAGONFLY.** 1948/1958  
The first helicopter to come to Stretton was a Hoverfly in 1947

**HELLCAT.** Grumman, U.S.A. 1944/1946 370 m.p.h.  
A carrier borne fighter that replaced the Wildcat and Corsair with remarkable success.

**HERON.** de Havilland. 1954/1956 220 m.p.h.  
The one seen was one of the Queen's Flight and undoubtedly brought Prince Philip for his two-day visit in May 1956. It was a version of the 4 engine, 14 seater civilian aircraft.

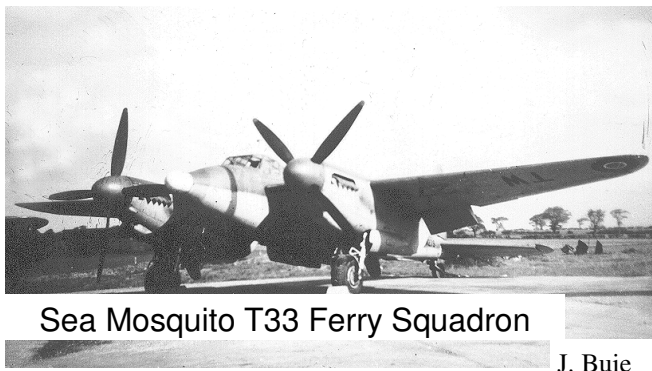
**U.S.A.A.F B-24 Liberator** In February 1944 two of these huge bombers, en route from North Africa, were diverted from Valley to Hawarden due to bad weather. Neither could find the latter airfield and one finally landed at Warton and the other at Stretton.

**LYSANDER.** Westland. 1942 210 m.p.h.  
A two seater high wing monoplane with ability to land and take off from rough grass strips. This may explain its appearance as the first aircraft to visit Stretton especially as one is known to have been based at Arbroath in 1941.

**MARTLET.** 1947/1949  
Early R.N. name for the 'Wildcat' q.v.

**MASTER. Miles.** 1947/1949 ca 250 m.p.h.  
Was used as a trainer in many of the second-line squadrons.

**MITCHELL.** North American, U.S.A. 1942/1943 275 m.p.h.  
A medium bomber that saw some action with the R.A.F. Not known why it was at Stretton unless it should have landed at Ringway.



**MOSQUITO** de Havilland. 1947/1952 370 – 420 m.p.h.

One of the outstanding R.A.F. aircraft of the war used as a fighter, light bomber and for photoreconnaissance.  
Types 3, 6, 16 and III were received from the R.A.F. Types 33, 37 and 39 were Sea Mosquitoes specially manufactured for the Navy and modified/equipped at Stretton.



**OXFORD.** Airspeed. 1949/1955. 200m.p.h.  
A 5-seater wooden aircraft first introduced in 1937 and used to train all sorts of flying personnel. It was later used for general duties such as transport.

**SEA BALLIOL.** Boulton Paul. 1952 290 m.p.h.  
A two-seater trainer built to replace the Harvard. Only 30 were delivered to second-line squadrons





1831 Squadron Seafire 15, 1949

B. Nash

### **SEAFIRE 15, 17, 47**

Vickers Supermarine. 1948/1952. 350 m.p.h.  
Developed from the Spitfire to operate from carriers. It came into service in 1942 and operated across the world during the war and after. The 47 had about 6 inches clearance between its propeller and the runway when the tail was up



B. Nash

**SEAFURY 10, 11.** Hawker. 1954/1955 460 m.p.h.  
This was the last piston-engined fighter-bomber. It saw service in the Korean War.



Sea Hawk being towed

A. Taylor



M. P. Cocker

**SEAHAWK.** Hawker. 1952/1956 600 m.p.h.  
A jet that succeeded the Seafury in 1955. Was in action at Suez.

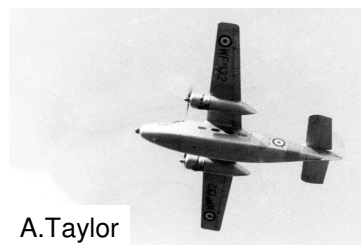
**SEA HORNET 20.** de Havilland/McDonnell Douglas.  
1948/1953 470 m.p.h.  
A radar equipped night fighter.



**.SEALAND** Short. 1948/1949

W. Clelland

**SEA OTTER.** Vickers Supermarine. 1948/1953 150 m.p.h.  
These amphibians passed through Stretton on their way to ships or shore stations. They were used for reconnaissance and search and rescue from 1943 onwards

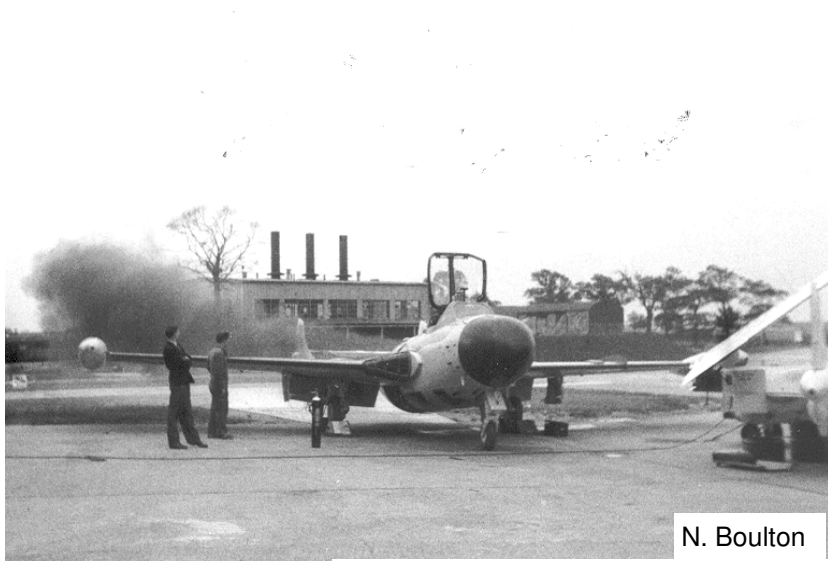


A. Taylor



A. Perrett

**SEA PRINCE.** Percival. 1952/1956  
These aircraft were mothballed for some time at Stretton. In 1956 some were converted to 'Admirals Barges'. They were completely stripped inside and then fitted out with soft furnishings, blue carpets and curtains. The outside was painted green.



N. Boulton



N. Boulton

**SEA VENOM 21.** de Havilland. 1953/1957 550 m.p.h  
 .The first all-weather jet fighter; succeeded the Hornet and was also at Suez.



A.Taylor

**VAMPIRE.** de Havilland. 1954/1957  
 A single-seat jet fighter of which some 313 were made at Chester. It entered F.A.A. service in 1947 and was withdrawn in 1957. There was also a trainer version, the T22.

**SEA VIXEN.** 1953/1954 700 m.p.h.

A fleet all-weather fighter that first flew in 1957 and came into service in 1959. Quite a number were made at Hawarden and may have come to Stretton for tests etc.

**SPITFIRE.** 1948/1949

This was probably the one that landed one day when the control tower had closed for the night. The Squadron Leader was furious at being waved down by Air Mechanics. "Who's in charge of this bloody place?" he wanted to know. When told it was Captain A.C. Miers V.C., D.S.O. and Bar he was suitably chastened!

### **B.O.A.C. SRATOCRUISER**

For a period in the mid-fifties B.O.A.C. used Burtonwood on the London-Prestwick-New York run while the runway at Ringway was being lengthened. The check-in was in the converted stables at the Patten Arms Hotel in Warrington, with a coach being the link to Burtonwood. At end-May, early June 1956 a Captain Redrup, piloting a Stratocruiser, mistook Stretton for Burtonwood. It was only as he touched down that he realised his error and lifted off again. All the exchanges were heard by the B.O.A.C. staff at the Patten Arms over their radio link with Burtonwood and Air Traffic Control at Ringway.

Apparently, after this, Captain Redrup's name always appeared on the flight board with the suffix 'R.N.'



**SWORDFISH.** Fairey. 1942/1945. 140 m.p.h.

This legendary aircraft came into naval service in 1936 and was judged obsolete in 1939. It remained in front line service though until May 1945. Widely known as the 'Stringbag' it was engaged in many actions across Europe and sunk thousands of tons of enemy naval and merchant shipping.

**TEMPEST.** Hawker. 1942/1943 420 m.p.h.

Two-seater fighter that was probably a Model I as II did not come in until after the war. The speed quoted is thought to be for the later models, IV and V.



**TIGER MOTH.** De Havilland. 1947/1952. 100m.p.h.  
Over 8000 were made, essentially for training pilots. It was fully aerobatic which Lt. Nash amply demonstrated at Stretton with his 'falling leaf' routine.



**VULCAN.** AVRO 1951?  
This was seen briefly during the the 1953 Navy Day flypast

**WALRUS.** Vickers Supermarine. 1949/1950. 135 m.p.h.  
An amphibian used for reconnaissance and gunnery spotting for its parent ship.

**WELLINGTON.** Vickers Armstrong. 1943/1946. 230 m.p.h.  
It is not known why this well-known bomber was at Stretton but it could have been for training purposes as there were several R.A.F. instructors stationed there.

**WILDCAT.** Grumman, U.S.A. 1943/1945. 320 m.p.h.  
One of the earliest fighters supplied to Britain under Lend-Lease.



**WYVERN.** Westland. 1954/1957 500 m.p.h.  
A long-range torpedo-carrying fighter serving from 1945 to 1956. It was a turboprop fighter.

## Crashed Planes at Stretton



C. Gibson



C. Gibson



C. Gibson



R. Williams

Pilot Lt. T.E. Sedgewick trapped in Sea Fury 14/3/53.  
See 'The Navy's Northern Reservists'



## Disposal of Surplus Aircraft

After the war many American Lease Lend aircraft, such as Corsairs, Wildcats, Hellcats and Avengers were brought to Stretton to be destroyed. If not destroyed they had to be returned to the U.S.A. under the terms of the agreement. AA3 Sid Hamilton advises that he was sent on a course to learn how to use Cortex explosive for this purpose. Four aircraft were piled in a pyramid after instruments had been removed and eight charges placed in the pile, including one under each engine bearer. The resultant wreckage was loaded on to a 'Queen Mary' and dumped. Vera Brocklehurst remembers lorries travelling down Arley Road to dump the scrap metal in pits in the farmers' fields. An army of scrap metal dealers promptly dug it up again and eventually had to be banned from doing so. Another disposal site was a disused mineshaft near Stafford.

In later years 'struck off charge aircraft' were destroyed on the station fire dump' or broken up by a team from the Aluminium works at Latchford, Warrington for recycling.



Destroying Martinet aircraft  
on station fire dump 1947



Sea Fires in storage

# **SQUADRONS**

Squadrons consisted of five to fifteen planes generally but there were a few exceptions. The second-line squadrons were numbered from 700 to 799; few of them were ever at Stretton. They had a support role often concerned with training.

Front-line squadrons were those that went into action. They were first numbered 800 to 899 but when this series ran out it was started again with a 1 in front i.e. 1800 up.

We give here a brief note about most of those that were at Stretton at any time during their existence.

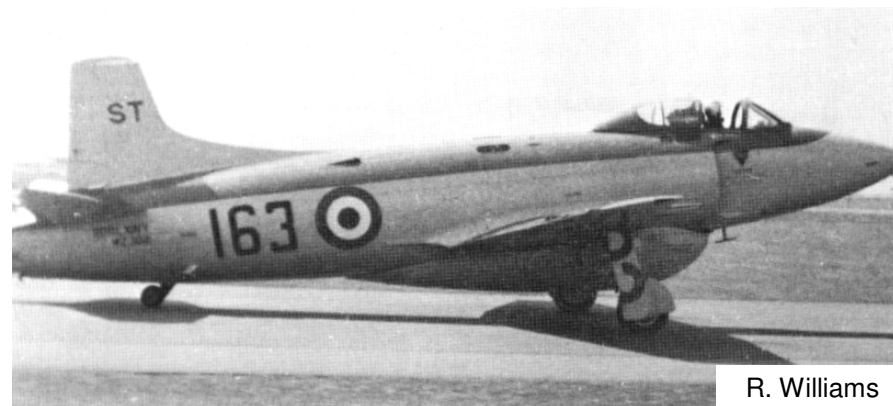
798	20 April 1944	30 July 1944
802	1 May 1950	3 May 1950
807	17 July 1947	31 July 1947
808	29 Sept 1942	16 Oct 1942
809	22 Mar 1943	13 July 1943
810	18 Feb 1943	20 March 1943
811	10 Dec 1943	12 Jan 1944
813	25 July 1951	27 July 1951
814	1 July 1944	8 Aug 1944
815	21 April 1942	22 April 1942
825	15 July 1943	15 July 1943
833	31 Dec 1942	1 Feb 1943
835	3 Nov 1943	8 Dec 1943
840	In transit from HMS Attacker March 1943	
846	Disbanded 23 May 1945	
881	20 Sept 1943	10 Nov 1943
886	7 Oct 1942	24 Oct 1942
893	In transit to be disbanded	

898	31 March 1955	28 Sept 1955
1830	3 Nov 1943	9 Dec 1943
1833	3 Nov 1943	8 Dec 1943
1834	20 Dec 1943	1 Feb 1944
1836	3 Feb 1944	14 Feb 1944
1837	12 Feb 1944	26 Feb 1944
1840	13 March 1944	13 April 1944
1842	13 July 1944	7 August 1944

The longer stays were by the following squadrons:

### 718 Squadron

In April 1955 some of 718 Squadron arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP with a Sea Vampire to train R.N.V.R. Squadron 1831 pilots to fly jet engined aircraft. It was to be equipped with Attackers like the Attacker No FB2 WZ 302 shown below at Stretton with the ST tailmarkings for Stretton. The earlier tail markings were JA.



R. Williams

## 728B Squadron

On 13 January 1958, 728B Squadron arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP as a pilotless drone target aircraft unit with six Firefly U9 aircraft which were flown on to Malta when ready.

## 767 Squadron

This squadron of Firefly FR4 and Sea Furies moved to H.M.S. BLACKCAP on 20 September 1952 and had Attackers added. It became the Landing Signal Officers Training Squadron with Avengers and Sea Hawks added later. Its function was to train Landing Signals Officers or "Batmen" for carrier deck landings. The pilots had the somewhat monotonous but exacting job of executing some 2000 landings per year for the training of the 'Batmen'. Because of the repetitive nature of this job they became known as "Clockwork Mice", even for some official purposes. They could be recognised locally by their ties – dark blue with a gold mouse on it.

It suffered a fatal crash on 5 February 1953 when R.E. Collingwood's Attacker came down at Winwick.

See ' [www.n-le-w.co.uk](http://www.n-le-w.co.uk) ' for detailed account etc.

It was disbanded at H.M.S. BLACKCAP on 31 March 1955. The picture below shows an Attacker F1 WA 513 at Stretton.



R. Williams



**798 Squadron**

Part of this squadron provided operational training at Stretton for new Barracuda squadrons from 20/04/44 to 30/07/44.

**801 Squadron**

Arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP 7 September 1942 and comprised twelve unmodified RAF Spitfire Va and Vb eventually replaced by twelve Seafire Ib. In October it left for H.M.S. FURIOUS to take part in the landings in North Africa.

**802 Squadron**

In transit 01/05/50 to 03/05/50

**807 Squadron**

Resident 17/07/47 to 31/07/47

**808 Squadron**

Embarked in the escort carrier BITER from Belfast in September 1942 and then disembarked at Stretton on the 29<sup>th</sup> to leave on the 16<sup>th</sup> October.

**809 Squadron**

Re-equipped here with Seafires 22/03/43 to 13/07/43 and embarked in UNICORN in August to provide cover for the Salerno landings.

**810 Squadron**

Returned from Cape Town on 18/02/43 with 15 aircraft. Went to Lee-on-Solent on 20/03/43 to re-equip with Barracudas.

**811 Squadron**

Resident from 10/12/43 to 12/01/44

**812 Squadron**

Arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP 1 June 1944 with twelve Barracuda II with six more added. In January 1945 it flew on to H.M.S. VENGEANCE and sailed through the Mediterranean to the British Pacific Fleet in the far East.

**813 Squadron**

In transit 25 – 27/07/51

**814 Squadron**

Reformed at Stretton on 01/07/44 with 12 (later 18) Barracudas as a torpedo bomber reconnaissance unit. It embarked on VENERABLE 08/08/44.

**815 Squadron**

Passing through 21,22/04/42

**821 Squadron**

Arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP 1 May 1944 with twelve Barracuda II and left in November 1944 to H.M.S. PUNCHER as a torpedo bomber reconnaissance squadron.

**827 Squadron**

Arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP 15<sup>th</sup> December 1942 as a torpedo bomber reconnaissance squadron with twelve Albacores. It was equipped with fourteen Barracudas and on 14 April 1943 flew off to join H.M.S. FURIOUS and then H.M.S. VICTORIOUS where it successfully dive bombed the German battleship TIRPITZ in Norway. See accounts of J. Gledhill and G. Chadwick.

**833 Squadron**

Arrived from Gibraltar in ARGUS on 31/12/42 and moved to Thorney Island on 01/02/43. Took over 825 squadron's aircraft for mine-laying, anti-shipping and anti-submarine work for Coastal Command.

**835 Squadron**

Was on CHASER on 06/11/43.

**837 Squadron**

Arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP 1 August 1944 as a torpedo bomber reconnaissance squadron with sixteen Barracuda II.

**840 Squadron**

Disembarked from ATTACKER to Macrihanish via Stretton on 02/04/43.

**846 Squadron**

Renumbered as 751 on 22/09/45.

**879 Squadron**

Moved to Stretton from Old Sarum on 22/03/43 and was then re-equipped with 10 Seafire 1bs. Went to Dundonald for a combined operations course.

**881 Squadron**

Arrived on 20/09/43 from Eglington and then went to FORMIDABLE on 10/11/43 for a short while to practise deck landings.

**886 Squadron**

Returned to the Fleet Air Arm at Stretton on 07/10/42 after a spell with Fighter Command. Left on 24/10/42 for periods at various shore stations.

**893 Squadron**

Passed through on way to being disbanded on 16/11/43.

**895 Squadron**

Formed at Stretton as a fighter squadron on 15/11/42 with Sea Hurricane 1bs.

**897 Squadron**

This was formed at Stretton on 01/08/42 but disbanded on 03/09 into 801 and 880 squadrons. It was then reformed on 1/12/42 with 6 Sea Hurricanes. After two more changes of aircraft it joined UNICORN with Seafire LII Cs on 04/08 and provided fighter cover for the Salerno landings.

**898 Squadron**

This Front Line Naval Squadron was at Stretton from 31/03/55 to 28/09/55. It was equipped with 12 Sea Hawks under Lt. Commander I. Campbell and consisted of 12 pilots, an Engineer Officer, an Electrical Officer and about 100 ratings of the trades mentioned in the Work section. It had embarked on H.M.S. ALBION in 1954, being the first ever squadron to do so on an angled deck using the deck mirror sight. It left the station to embark on the new carrier, H.M.S. ARK ROYAL.



### **1830 Squadron**

This fighter squadron was first formed at Quonset Point, U.S.A. with 10 Corsair 1s on 01/06/43. It embarked on SLINGER on 09/10/43 for the U.K. and arrived in Belfast on 01/11 to move to Stretton 2 days later.

### **1831 Squadron**

Was formed at Quonset Point on 01/07/43 and equipped like 1830. It crossed the Atlantic though on TRUMPETER but arrived at Stretton on the same day. It was disbanded on 10/12/43 when part of 15<sup>th</sup> Naval Fighter Wing q.v.

Reformed at HMS Blackcap 1 June 1947 as the first fighter squadron in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve with six Seafire XV and XVIII. These were replaced by nine Sea Fury FB11 and again in May 1955 by seven Attacker FB2 like the WZ 383 with its ST tail fin marking shown below at Stretton in 1955.

It was disbanded 10 March 1957 due to defence spending cuts.



R. Williams

### **1832 Squadron**

Came from Speke on 09/12/43 and continued its task of creating fighter flights for attaching to T.B.R. squadrons on escort carriers. It left for Eglington, Northern Ireland on 02/02/44.

### **1833 Squadron**

This also came across from Quonset Point but arrived on 03/12/43 via TRUMPETER and Belfast.

### **1834 Squadron**

After deck landing training on USS CHARGER it left Quonset Point on 01/11/43 with its Corsair IIs on KHEDIVE for the U.K. It disembarked at Maydown, went to Speke then back to Maydown before arriving at Stretton on 20/12/43. It became part of the 47<sup>th</sup> Naval Fighter Wing q.v.

### **1836 Squadron**

Another squadron from Quonset Point. It went to Burscough before forming the 47<sup>th</sup> Wing at Stretton with 1834.

### **1837 Squadron**

The same story as 1836 except that it came on BEGUM and got to Stretton on 12/02/44. It became the 6<sup>th</sup> Naval Fighter Wing q.v.

### **1840 Squadron**

Formed at Burscough on 01/03/44 it came to Stretton on 13/03/44 for working up. It left on 13/04/44 to go to Northern Ireland. Sadly two of its Dutch pilots were killed two days after arrival.

### **1841 Squadron**

Arrived at H.M.S. BLACKCAP 18 August 1952 as a Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve Anti Submarine Squadron with five Firefly FR 1. These were replaced in turn by eight Firefly AS 6 and then six Avenger AS 5.

It was disbanded 10 March 1957 due to defence spending cuts.

### **1842**

Arrived from Brunswick via RAJAH on 13/07/44 but went to Eglington before going to FORMIDABLE on 07/08/44 to become part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Naval Fighter Wing.

## **NAVAL WINGS**

From June 1943 the squadrons embarked in a carrier were in the form of a 'Wing'. The 'Wing' was given a number, followed by 'Naval' and a suffix to denote its purpose, either 'fighter' or 'torpedo bomber reconnaissance (T.B.R.).' They were usually under the command of a lieutenant-commander, equivalent to the R.A.F. rank of squadron leader.

### **6<sup>th</sup> Naval Fighter Wing**

Was formed at Burscough on 28/2/44 out of 1837 Squadron from Stretton. It was then disbanded on 14/08/44 into 47<sup>th</sup> Wing aboard VICTORIOUS. It was reformed on the same day from 1842 Squadron on FORMIDABLE and joined by 1841 in September. It provided cover for attacks on the TIRPITZ and then with the British Pacific Fleet.

### **15<sup>th</sup> Naval Fighter Wing**

Was formed on 08/11/43 at Stretton from 1830, 1831 and 1833 Corsair Squadrons. 1831 was disbanded into the other two squadrons before joining ILLUSTRIOUS on 22/12/43. Was involved in action in Sabang, Palembang and Okinawa with the Eastern and British Pacific Fleets.

Bombing an Oil Refinery  
in Palembang, Sumatra.



Courtesy of Fleet Air Arm Museum

### **47<sup>th</sup> Naval Fighter Wing**

Formed at Stretton on 17/01/44 from 1834 and 1836 Squadrons. It flew on to VICTORIOUS in March and covered attacks on the TIRPITZ. Also saw action against the Japanese.



Sea Hawks



Attacker

All photos by A.Taylor at Stretton



Avengers



Sea Fury trainer

# **COMMANDING OFFICERS**

**The Commanding Officers of H.M.S. BLACKCAP were as follows:**

Captain Maslin, R.N.	1942 - 1943
Captain D. McIntyre,	1943 - 1944
Captain H.G. Scott, R.N.	1944 - 1948
Captain Tony Miers, R.N.	1948 - 1950
Captain St. John Tyrwhitt	1950 - 1951
Captain Dickie Courage, R.N.	1951 - 1953
Captain David Trentham, R.N.	1953 - 1954
Captain Mike Harvey	1954 - 1957
Captain James Stopford, R.N.	1957 - 1958
Lt. Cdr. Kenneth Roberts, R.N.	1959, Officer in charge (ex SANDERLING)

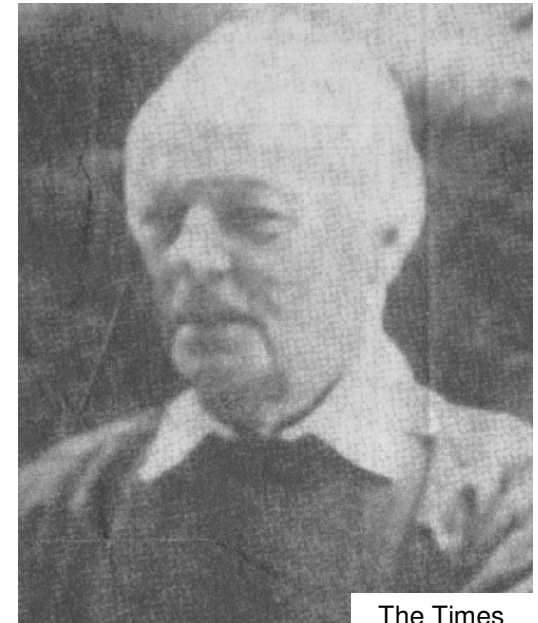
## **Captain Mike Harvey**

Mike Harvey was Commanding Officer of H.M.S. Blackcap in 1954 until he retired in 1957. He joined the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth in 1927 and was later appointed First Lt. of the submarine UNDINE. In January 1940 the UNDINE was attacked by German anti submarine vessels, damaged and forced to surface. The crew scuttled the submarine and were captured and became prisoners of war.

Because of his attempts to escape he was officially registered by the Germans as an escaper and troublemaker and eventually transferred to the infamous Colditz prison. There he was known as a “ghost” because he and another fellow prisoner hid in the castle walls for 352 days making the Gestapo believe they had escaped. He was released by American forces at the end of the war in 1945.

He was appointed Lt. Cdr and Captain of the frigate S.T. AUSTEL BAY, then promoted to Commander in charge of the Boys’ Training Establishment H.M.S. St VINCENT.

After retiring from the Navy he worked for Glynwed International for 8 years and became a main board director. He died in 1996 at the age of 82.



The Times





The Times

## Captain Dickie Courage OBE DSC

He first went to sea as a midshipman on the battleship Warspite, and later as he specialised in signals and communications he served on many ships. He was awarded a DSC whilst on the cruiser Scylla. He was one of the few British naval officers to witness the Japanese surrender on the battleship Missouri.

His last appointment was in command of HMS Blackcap from 1951 until he retired at his own request in 1958.

He was known as the Navy's best jockey and during his time at H.M.S. BLACKCAP he rode in his last horse race, finishing third in the 1951 Liverpool Foxhunters race at the Aintree Grand National on his own horse Prudent Glen. He died in 1998 aged 88.



The Times

Leading the Grand Military Gold Cup at Sandown 1935 on Young Cuthbert



Cheshire Life

Stirring the Christmas Pudding at H.M.S. BLACKCAP in 1951

Anthony Cecil Capel Miers was a Scot with a somewhat fearsome reputation. At the age of 18 he joined the Royal Navy as a cadet in 1924 and 5 years later went into the submarine service. He was given command of submarine L54 in 1936 and after a spell with the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet returned to submarines in the second half of 1940 as Commanding Officer of submarine H.M.S. TORBAY. He was awarded the D.S.O. and Bar in 1941 after sinking or damaging 70000 tons of enemy ships in the Mediterranean. In March 1942 TORBAY entered Corfu Harbour to attack four Italian troopships. Having surfaced at night to charge batteries Miers found at daylight that the convoy had left. He then attacked two supply ships and a destroyer with torpedoes. One of the former ships was sunk but the torpedoes missed the destroyer that then gave chase and dropped about 40 depth charges. The TORBAY escaped after being in the Straits of Corfu for 17 hours. In July the Captain and crew attended Buckingham Palace to be decorated by King George VI. Tony Miers received the Victoria Cross.

It was in 1948 that he came to R.N.A.S. Stretton as C.O. and subsequently obtained his pilot's certificate and 'A' license. Mention is made in a few places in this book of his pugnacious character but he could also be impulsively warm hearted. George Rose who was very badly injured when an engine fell on him at R.N.A.S. Burscough will have no word said against Captain Miers who ensured that the best treatment available was given to him. After Stretton Miers held several commands finally becoming Flag Officer, Middle East on his promotion to Rear Admiral in 1956. He retired in 1960.

**A. C. C. (Tony) Miers**  
VC, KBE, CB, DSO and Bar.



Sunday Mail



A.Taylor

Expeditor about to take off

**R.N.V.R.**

## **THE ROYAL NAVAL VOLUNTEER RESERVE (R.N.V.R.)**

Mention of 'R.N.V.R.' to anyone who knows anything about R.N.A.S. Stretton invariably evokes the response "Ah yes, the 'weekend fliers', 1831 and 1841 squadrons". Their story is well told in the article by Ray Williams on the next few pages but there was more to the R.N.V.R. than this. Its history and role are worth a few minutes study and thought.

It was formed under the Naval Forces Act in 1903 after many years campaigning by many well-known figures, M.P.s, the Press and general public. Up to the outbreak of WW 1 it was kept going by the dedication and donations of its volunteer officers and ratings. They carried out weekly drills and training with the minimum of Admiralty support and money. In 1914 most of the ratings of the force were enlisted into the Royal Naval Brigade to fight as soldiers. They were involved in many of the campaigns across Europe and suffered the same grievous losses as other forces there. A few ratings went to sea while most of the officers were given administration and training duties ashore.

Between the wars funding and equipment were much improved with a limit of 5000 personnel set. In 1937, due to the perceived German threat, a Supplementary Reserve was created from experienced yachtsmen and ex-professional seafarers whose work or travelling distance prevented them from attending weekly drills. When war was declared in 1939 only officer volunteers were put into the R.N.V.R., ratings had to enlist as R.N. 'hostilities only' volunteers. An R.N.V.R. (Air) branch had been formed

in 1938/39 and by 1942 there were over 4000 pilots and 800 observers on active service. During the war R.N.V.R. officers of all disciplines increasingly had to take command in the F.A.A. and the Navy, with the vast majority in the latter. They saw action with the destruction of the Italian Fleet, the sinking of the BISMARCK, attacks on the SCHARNHORST, in Greece, Crete and North Africa, defence of convoys to Russia, Malta and Gibraltar. Later there were the battles and bombing raids in the Far East and the epic of D-Day. The individual stories of the harsh conditions, the losses and the bravery make incredible reading. It has to be realised though that there was more to it than F.A.A. aircrew and officers commanding ships. The R.N.V.R. served in every branch of the R.N., from mechanical and electrical engineers to padres and surgeons. There were, in fact, over 2000 of the latter plus 550 dental surgeons. By 1945 88% of officers in ships were R.N.V.R. The 1942 photo also shows that Station Flight at Stretton completely relied upon the R.N.V.R. for its maintenance officers.

It took over 2 years to discharge the R.N.'s wartime personnel and it wasn't until early 1947 that the R.N.V.R. and its Air Branch really got going again. This time though ratings were accepted again, they had to sign on for 5 years, do 80 drills or more and 14 days annual sea training. The scale and expense of the Air Branch after this and its subsequent demise can be appreciated by reading Ray William's article.

**THE NAVY'S NORTHERN RESERVISTS**  
**By Ray Williams**

First published in Aeroplane Monthly December 1979

On Saturday, February 17, 1957, HMS *Blackcap*, the Royal Naval Air Station Stretton, in Cheshire, was the venue of what must be the most bizarre parade in the history of the Fleet Air Arm. The parade was part of the last muster of the Northern Air Division of the RNVR, which was being disbanded on the grounds of economy.

The day began with thick fog reducing visibility to about ten yards, preventing the aircraft bringing Admiral Sir Casper John, Flag Officer (Air) Home, from landing. Consequently, the Admiral Commanding Reserves, Rear Admiral Thistleton-Smith, stepped into the breach as the inspecting officer. After the formal aspects of the parade were completed the station band solemnly broke out into the Dead March from Saul to accompany a procession headed by a Land Rover carrying a coffin draped with an Ensign and in the care of a chaplain. RNVR ratings followed immediately behind the coffin, and behind them came some 70 RNVR officers wearing black suits and bowler hats and carrying furled umbrellas.



The funeral of “the last RNVR pilot” took place with due ceremony outside the NAD headquarters and was concluded with the incantation: “Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust; if the grog don’t get you then the Admiralty must”.

Wreaths were laid bearing messages such as “Sympathy from all at the Kremlin”, and on the headstone was the inscription “The Northern Air Division RNVR; forcibly destroyed by brute force and ignorance; 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1957” with the epitaph: “Here lies the Northern Air Division; disbanded by their Lords decision. Is it for us to deem unwise, their efforts to economise?”. Three cheers were raised for the corpse and a ten-gun salute was fired, after which the whole party retired to the Ward Room.

Only ten years earlier, in April 1947, the formation of three air squadrons of the RNVR was announced; 1830 Squadron at Abbotsinch, 1831 Squadron, Stretton, and 1832 Squadron at Culham. The following month saw the appointment of Lt Cdr Noel G. Mitchell DSC RNVR as the CO of 1831 Squadron, with Lt A W. Theobald DSM RN as the QFI and staff officer. When flying commenced on the official day of formation, Sunday June 1, 1831 comprised 14 experienced but out-of-practice pilots, and was equipped with six Supermarine Seafire XVIs and one North American Harvard. The first member to become airborne was the CO, flying dual with Lt Theobald in the Harvard.





Not until August were the Seafires introduced into the training programme, when each weekend was devoted to bringing the squadron up to operational standard. The squadron's first fatal accident occurred on September 19, 1947, Lt (A) D.C. Twemlow being killed when his Seafire, SX120, crashed at High Legh on its approach to Stretton. In May 1948 Lt Cdr Mitchell sadly decided to resign his command because of business commitments. His successor was one of the original members of the squadron, Lt Cdr R. I. Gilchrist. The squadron carried out a formation flypast at Stretton on May 29, 1948, for the Admiral Commanding Reserves, who was making the first of his annual visits to the squadron. A similar flypast was put on for the visit of Vice Admiral Portal, Admiral (Air) Home, on June 13.

Sea Fury FB11 TF972 and Firefly T.2 MB465 joined the squadron in July 1948, giving the aircrew a foretaste of things to come. The reason these two aircraft were taken on charge is unknown, but it may have been a means of keeping the squadron familiar with front line equipment.

The entire squadron, including the Sea Fury and Firefly, flew down to RNAS Culdrose on September 4, 1948, for the start of the annual 14 days training. This camp was an Air Weapons Course, giving the squadron its first opportunity to gain experience with contemporary air weapons appropriate to Seafire operations. The training culminated in two squadron strikes on Treligga, first with nine aircraft and then with 12. Four Seafires led by Lt Cdr Gilchrist took part in a joint exercise with 1832 and 1833 squadrons and aircraft from the School of Naval Air Warfare (SNAW) at Culham on January 23, 1949.

The highlight of the exercise was a low-level attack on Culham by 24 Seafires of 1832 Squadron and SNAW, top cover being provided by the eight Seafires of 1831 and 1833 squadrons.

Initially, maintenance crews for the RNVR squadrons were provided by the Royal Navy. However, early in 1949, authority was received by the squadrons to start recruiting RNVR maintenance ratings. 1831 immediately initiated a recruiting campaign, starting with an exhibition on the top floor of Lewis's department store in Manchester. Aircraft and equipment were displayed on a nearby bomb site. To arouse further interest a flypast was made over Manchester on February 12 by a formation of four Seafires from 1831 Squadron supported by 16 Spitfires provided by 610, 611 and 613 Squadrons of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. A week later a formation comprising four Seafires of 1831 Squadron, four Seafires of 1833 Squadron and four Fireflies of 1830 Squadron made a flypast over the local towns and included the Liverpool football ground at Anfield shortly before the start of a match. The campaign proved to be very successful and the full authorised complement of 170 recruits was soon reached.

### **Getting it right**

In the summer of 1949 training activities increased, particularly in the number of airfield dummy deck landings (ADDLS). For the ADDLS the runway was considered a carrier deck, with a Deck Landing Control Officer (DLCO) controlling the approach of the aircraft in circuit. The aircraft flew round and round in the circuit like clockwork mice until the approach over the "round-down" was really in the groove at the correct speed, height and altitude, with the pilot reacting almost instinctively to the batsman's signals.

On September 20 a formation of 11 Seafire 15s and 17s of 1831 Squadron, led by the Senior Pilot, Lt Sanville, left Stretton to fly to RNAS Lee-on-Solent at the start of their annual camp. There they were joined by the Squadron Commander, Lt Cdr Gilchrist, who led the formation on September 21 to the deck of HMS *Illustrious*, where they were to spend the next eight days with 1833 Squadron from Bramcote (Nr Nuneaton). The training was intensive, each pilot making about ten deck landings. 1831 was unfortunate in suffering two incidents. The first occurred on the first day when Lt(A) K. H. Tickle, flying Seafire SX165/120/JA, also ran into the barrier. The squadron returned to Stretton via Lee-on-Solent on September 29.



Seafire 17 SX102/JA LT CMDR R.I. Gilchrist 1831 Squadron

May 14, 1949, saw a remarkable escape by Lt(A) Alan Braidwood. It was his birthday, and he proceeded to celebrate the occasion by beating up the beach at Formby in a Seafire. Unfortunately, as he was making a turn at very low altitude the wing tip hit the shore and broke off. He immediately straightened up and heaved back on the stick, which resulted in the tail striking the ground and the fuselage breaking off just aft of the cockpit. The nose section, containing the pilot, cartwheeled down the beach for about a quarter of a mile before coming to rest, but although he was seriously injured, Braidwood survived. However, shortly afterwards on July 12, 1831 Squadron suffered one of its worst disasters. Two Seafires, SP325 and SX314, flying in close formation through appalling weather conditions, crashed into the top of a hill near Wildboar Clough in the Peak District, killing both pilots, Lt (A) F J Dyke and Lt (A) E H R Eccles. Had they been flying just a few feet higher, it was thought they would have cleared the hill. Lt (A) G A Beaumont was killed on February 12, 1950, when his Seafire apparently exploded in the air and crashed at Adlington in Lancashire.

Perhaps the most significant FAA event of 1950 was the launching of *HMS Ark Royal* by the Queen at the Cammel Laird Shipyard in Birkenhead on May 3. The event was marked by a flypast of 40 Naval aircraft, Seafires, Sea Hornets and Sea Furies, led by 1831 Squadron's CO.

On August 28 the squadron left Stretton for RNAS Yeovilton, where they stayed overnight before proceeding for their second period of training on *HMS Illustrious*, again with 1833 Squadron.

One of 1831's keenest pilots, Yorkshire farmer Lt F Morrell was struggling to get the harvest in when the squadron left Stretton. However, he managed to complete his harvesting and was able to fly from Stretton on September 5 to join the squadron, amid much publicity.

This time the squadron suffered only one accident, when Seafire 17 SX242/113/JA missed the wires and crashed into the barrier. By a quirk of fate it was again Lt. W. A. Storey's Seafire, although as members of 1831 quickly pointed out, it was being flown by Lt Cdr Hallam of 1833 Squadron. In October 1950, presumably in anticipation of re-equipment, Sea Fury T20 VX287/210/JA was taken on charge. It became a very popular aeroplane, enabling dual instruction with an advanced aeroplane for the first time. In fact the Fury trainer was superior in virtually every respect to the squadron's Seafires. The squadron was still equipped with Seafires and Harvards when its annual training, an Air Weapons Course, was undertaken at RNAS St Merryn in July 1951. In addition, the squadron still had the single Sea Fury T20 and, for communications purposes, Auster V TJ704, one of only five Austers known to have been on Royal Navy charge post-war. Shortly after their return from St Merryn, the squadron took part in the first Navy Day Air Display, held at Stretton on July 28, the last opportunity to demonstrate their Seafires. The following month saw the beginning of a new era with the delivery of what is considered to have been the finest piston-engined fighter of all time, The Hawker Sea Fury FB11. The unit's Sea Furies made their public debut in a formation flypast at the Hooton Park Battle of Britain Air Display on September 15, 1951.



Sea Fury T20 VX307/210/JA



Sea Fury being  
armed at Hal Far  
Malta 1951

Seafire B12366 crashed on Aircraft Carrier "Illustrious" in 1956, the pilot was unhurt



Intensive flying training with the new mounts was undertaken throughout the winter, and this effort was rewarded when the squadron was selected to be the first to carry out its annual training overseas. On May 15, 1952, Lt Cdr Gilchrist, flying a Sea Fury T20, led a formation of nine Sea Fury FB11s and a Sea Fury T20 on a flight from Stretton to RNAS Hal Far, in Malta, via RNAS Lee-on-Solent and Hyeres in France. The training concentrated on air weapons, but included tactical exercises with Hal Far-based aircraft and ship-borne aircraft from the Mediterranean Fleet. After a most successful period of training the squadron returned to Stretton on May 30. The first Sea Fury accident occurred on July 20, 1952, when Lt (A) A G J Phillips unwisely attempted a slow roll at low altitude at RAF Harwarden, and was killed when the aircraft stalled and crashed on the aerodrome.

Of the original four RNVR squadrons formed in 1947 only one, 1830 was equipped for anti-submarine duties. However, with the increasing importance of the anti-submarine role it was decided to expand the RNVR Air Branch by forming five anti-submarine squadrons, 1840 to 1844, in addition to two further fighter squadrons. The first of these, 1840, formed at RNAS Culham in 1951 and was equipped with Firefly Mk Is. The remaining four squadrons, also equipped with Fireflies, were formed in 1952.

During May 1952 it was announced that the larger RNVR squadrons were to be raised to the level of Air Division. The Northern Air Division (NAD) was formed at Stretton June 1, and 1831's CO R I Gilchrist, received his "brass-hat" when appointed CO of the Division and promoted to rank of Commander (A). At the same time Lt (A) Ken Tickle was appointed CO of 1831 Squadron and promoted to Lieutenant Commander (A).

Firefly T3s started arriving at NAD during July for the formation of the new Anti-Submarine Squadron, No 1841. Lt (A) Peter Rougier was the first of the division's pilots to fly an 1841 Firefly when he made a familiarisation flight on July 26, 1952. This flight almost ended in disaster when the port undercarriage leg collapsed on landing and the underwing tank burst and ignited on contact with the ground. When the Firefly came to rest Rougier rapidly vacated the cockpit and the fire section quickly had the fire extinguished before the aircraft was seriously damaged. Lt Cdr Tickle was transferred to become the CO of 1841, which was officially reformed on August 18, and Lt (A) W A Storey was promoted, becoming the CO of 1831 Squadron.

Both squadrons of NAD were selected to take part in the flypast for the Coronation Review of the Fleet at Spithead on June 15, 1953. Taking part in the flypast of some 300 naval aircraft were eight Sea Furies of 1831 Squadron and four Fireflies of 1841. After the flypast, instead of returning to RNAS Culham with the others, Gilchrist, who had been flying a Firefly, did a considerable hustle. Airborne over *HMS Surprise* at 1735, he peeled out of the formation as soon as they had cleared the mainstream and made a quick landing at RNAS Gosport. There he changed from his flying kit into a brand new uniform, embarked in a helicopter and was dropped on *HMS Illustrious's* flight deck at 1810 in time to get a boat across to *Surprise* for the Queen's cocktail party at 1830.

On March 14, 1953, during the preparation for the annual camp, a Sea Fury T20 flown by Lt Sedgewick, under instruction from the Air Weapons Officer, Lt D Leonard, RN, suffered loss of power when about to get airborne.

The brakes failed to halt the aircraft, which ran off the end of the runway and turned over. Lt Leonard managed to break out of the aircraft, but Lt Sedgewick had to wait some time for a crane to lift it; fortunately, there was no fire and neither pilot was injured. The weekend after the Coronation Review both squadrons left Stretton for their annual 14 days continuous training; 1841 for a standard anti-submarine course at RNAS Eglinton and 1831 to RNAS St Merryn for Air Weapons Training. 1831 spent a weekend during the training period on *HMS Illustrious*, when the squadron executed 55 landings at the cost of one barrier. This was a result of Lt (A) J Hamer picking up two wires, which overloaded the arrestor hook, the Sea fury coming to the customary spectacular halt in the crash barrier.



Sea Fury T20 VX287/210/ST  
Crashed after engine cut on take-off  
at Stretton 14 March 1953



Ariel Trophy Award for efficiency 1954

NATO exercises Mariner and Momentum kept both squadrons busy for several weekends in August and September, providing opportunities for some legalised low flying amongst the mast-heads in south and east coast harbours and port installations in the Low Countries. Presumably for these exercises, the NAD aircraft received red and yellow invasion markings. At the invitation of the Royal Netherlands Naval Air Service, 50 members of the NAD visited the air station at Valkenburg, near the Hague, on Saturday, September 12. They left Stretton in a variety of aircraft; eight Sea Furies of 1831 and four Fireflies of 1841 plus four Dominies, one Anson and a Sea Prince, borrowed from various units. The Division returned to Stretton on the Sunday afternoon.



Firefly with Red & Yellow "Invasion" stripe for exercise Mariner or Momentum in 1955

The year 1954 got off to a fine start, with an early announcement that the NAD's electrical section, commanded by Lt Cdr G Jones, had won an efficiency award, the Ariel trophy, which was presented to them by Admiral Commanding Reserves Vice-Admiral A K Scott-Moncrieff.

This was followed by 1831 Squadron winning the newly-presented Kemsley Flying Trophy. A flight led by the Squadron CO Lt Cdr(A) W A Storey, competed against other RNVR teams and Storey achieved the best individual results, coming first in both 30 degrees rocket firing and anti-submarine bombing. Unfortunately this success was marred by the death of Lt(A) Hughes on March 21. His Sea Fury, VW242/105/JA, crashed at Barton when it fell out of control while taking part in formation aerobatics.

The NAD received a tremendous boost to its prestige when it was selected to lead the flypast for Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh during their inspection of the RNVR on Horseguards Parade at the RNVR Jubilee Review Parade on June 12. After two and a half months of weekend rehearsals the parade took place in pouring rain, and the flypast was postponed until the following weekend. By this time her Majesty was in residence at Windsor Castle, which necessitated a change of route. After a practice flypast on June 18 the flypast of 96 RNVR Fireflies and Sea Furies, Firefly V, was successfully carried out.

There was a full muster of 80 officers and 200 ratings with their 12 Sea Furies and eight fireflies for the annual inspection by the Admiral Commanding Reserves, Vice-Admiral A K Scott-Moncrieff. In addition to the usual formation flypast the Division delivered a mock attack on the airfield, which was defended by local units of the Territorial Army who made loud bangs whilst blowing up various objects during the attack. The display terminated with the aircraft executing the usual naval stream landing.



On the evening of Friday August 20, 14 Sea Furies and ten Fireflies of the NAD left Stretton to fly to Lee-on-Solent on the first leg of a flight to Malta for their 14 days continuous training. The following morning the Division left Lee on the next stage of their flight. Over central France they encountered bad weather and were instructed to land at Istres, instead of Cuers as arranged. Whilst there a Firefly developed ignition trouble and had to be left behind when the Division continued their flight because of the sea crossing to Hal Far, and another Firefly had to remain at Istres to act as an escort. The remainder of the Division continued on their way, arriving at Hal Far late in the day. After a day's rest the training programme started in earnest on the Monday. On the first day, while returning from an anti-submarine exercise, Firefly V WB248/248/ST suffered an hydraulic failure which necessitated the pilot, Lt(A) A T Thomson, making a wheels-up landing. The spare ignition part required for the unserviceable Firefly at Istres was delivered by Meteor from Hal Far and the two delayed Fireflies finally arrived in Malta on August 25.



Firefly A35 WB248/284/ST 1841 Squadron  
After crash landing at Hal Far Malta in 1954

Both squadrons capitalised on Malta's magnificent weather, completing the full programme of air weapons and anti-submarine training in 452 sorties totalling 639 flying hours. The return flight to Stretton was quite eventful, two Fireflies and the Sea Fury going unserviceable at Cuers, and another Firefly dropping out at Lee-on-Solent. The NAD's Harvard T.2Bs were replaced by Sea Palliol T.21s in August. These aircraft tended to be used more for communications duties than for training, and the spaciousness of the Sea Balliol cockpit made it particularly popular.

Lt Cdr(A) W A Storey resigned as CO of 1831 Squadron in February 1955 and was replaced by another of the original members, Lt Cdr F Morrell.

A combined land, sea and air exercise for reserve units took place on March 19 and 20. Known as "Exercise 1984", it was aimed at capturing a nuclear scientist, "Professor Goldstein" who was recuperating from a nervous breakdown at Kirkmaiden on the Mull of Galloway. The exercise was successfully completed with a sea-borne landing at Kirkmaiden, aircraft of the Northern, Midland and Scottish Air Divisions providing air cover.

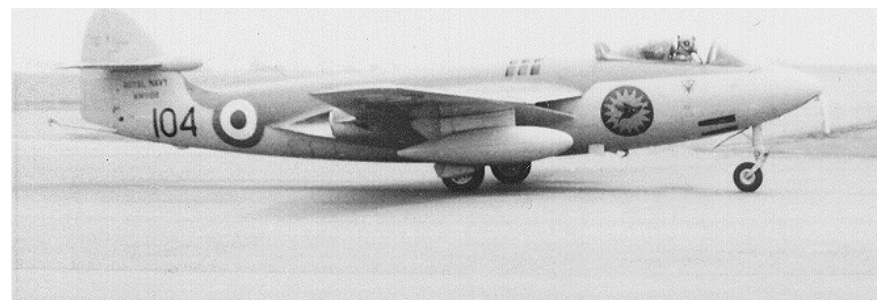
To 1831 Squadron fell the distinction of being the first RNVR squadron to convert to jets. This necessitated a further re-organisation of the squadron. Lt Cdr(A) P L V Rougier was appointed CO of 1831 Squadron and Lt Cdr(A) Morrell transferred to 1841 Squadron, which he was to take over on the retirement of Lt Cdr(A) K H Tickle later in the year. A nucleus of pilots remained from the Sea Fury days, but the majority were new young National Service trained pilots.



The announcement that the squadron's new equipment was to be the Vickers Supermarine Attacker was viewed with some trepidation, particularly as stories of the Attacker's unpopularity with RN Squadrons had preceded it to the RNVR. Three instructors from 718 Squadron arrived at Stretton in May with their Sea Vampire T22 to convert 1831 to jets. Conversion of the first batch of 1831 Squadron pilots started on May 14 and continued through to the end of June, by which time all pilots had flown the Attacker. To speed up the conversion, the squadron's annual fortnight's training was held at Stretton during June. The pilots found the Attacker much more pleasant to fly than expected, although the controls were rather heavy and required continual retrimming. Initially, only two Attackers were on the squadron strength and on an occasion when one of these aircraft went unserviceable ten sorties were flown in one day by the other aircraft. 1831 Squadron was officially reformed on July 4, 1955, with a proposed strength of seven Attackers and one Sea Vampire T22. However, it was not until the following month that the squadron reached its full strength.



718 Squadron during jet conversion of 1831 Squadron Stretton May/June 1955



Sea Hawk F33 898 Squadron Stretton 1955

July 1955 saw the first tentative attempts at formation aerobatics, which proved so successful that it was decided to form a display team. Seven weeks later, it was ready to go. The display team comprised four aircraft led by Lt(A) P Barlow and a single aircraft usually flown by Lt Cdr(A) P L V Rougier, whose sole ambition appeared to be to scare the crowd to death with his fast, very low level runs, usually made when everyone's attention was concentrated on the formation. The team's first public appearance was at Hooton Park's Battle of Britain display in September, and this was followed by six further public performances before the end of the year. *Flight* describing the RAF Valley Battle of Britain display on September 23, 1955, said "1831 RNVR Squadron's Attackers hung together as though steel hawsers joined them". Unfortunately, 1955 was not without tragedy. The Division's RN Staff Officer and QFI, Lt Cdr C J Lavender, DSC, was killed while making his first flight in an Attacker on November 10, 1955, when WP281/172/ST stalled into the ground immediately after take off.

Shortly afterwards, on December 17, Lt(A) P Barlow, flying Attacker WK322/172/ST on a local training flight, found that he was unable to lower the undercarriage because of an hydraulic failure. Although advised to fly out to sea and eject, he decided that he would make a belly landing. After flying around for some time to burn off excess fuel, the belly landing was successfully accomplished, the empty ventral fuel tank acting rather like a cushion to protect the pilot from injury and the airframe from serious damage.

Although 1831 Squadron had devoted its two week's annual training to converting to Attackers at its home base, 1841 Squadron, which was still soldiering on with its Firefly AS6s, was fortunate in being able to hold its annual training camp at Hal Far in Malta. A formation of six Firefly AS6s led by the CO, Lt Cdr(A) K H Tickle, left Stretton on the evening of May 27, 1955, for RNAS Lee-on-Solent, where they stayed overnight. The formation left the following morning for Hal Far flying via Marseilles/Marignane, and arrived after spending six hours in the air. On arrival at Hal Far the Squadron's strength was brought up to 12 Fireflies, six being provided by the RNAS at Hal Far.



Firefly T3

The training programme, which concentrated primarily on weapons training, was completed satisfactorily and seven Firefly AS6s of 1841 Squadron left Hal Far on June 19 for their return to Stretton, arriving back on the same day. The phasing out of the service of 1841 Squadron's Firefly AS6s started in October 1955, with the arrival of the first Avenger AS5, and conversion was completed during November. The Avenger proved to be very popular with the Squadron personnel, being very easy to fly.

The introduction of the Avenger saw the passing of the NAD's distinctive red and yellow-banded spinner. The Avenger had the 1841 Squadron badge applied to the top of the fin and the Attackers had 1831 Squadron's "Golden flying greyhound" emblem painted on the nose. The CO's Attacker, WZ283/170ST (and subsequently coded 810) varied slightly from this as the flying greyhound was given a red flying helmet.

Both squadrons took part in the annual combined reserve forces exercise in March 1956. The exercise was named "Appointment with Venus" after a contemporary film about recovering a panto cow from a farm some two miles from Abersoch on the Lley Peninsular, North Wales.

On April 28, 1956, the NAD again visited the Royal Netherlands Naval Station at Valkenburgh. A total of 34 officers and ratings flew from Stretton to Valkenburgh in five Avengers, six Attackers, two Sea Vampires, one Sea Balliol and one Dominie.

During April and May there was much activity by the NAD as they prepared for a visit of HRH Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, to RNAS Stretton on May 16/17, 1956.

After HRH had completed his inspection of the aircraft and men of the NAD, he went into the control tower to watch a flying display. A flypast by the aircraft of both squadrons was followed by 1831's aerobatic team. During one of the CO's low level 600 mph beat-ups he struck a large crow, flying at the same altitude but somewhat slower, which disintegrated in a most spectacular way. Fortunately, the Attacker was undamaged. The display was brought to an end by a most impressive stream landing of the NAD's aircraft. Prince Philip spent the evening in the Ward Room before leaving to stay overnight at the house of the CO of the NAD, Cdr Gilchrist. After inspecting the hangars and workshops the following morning, HRH left for RNAS Arbroath.



On June 22, 1841 Squadron left Stretton for their annual training at Malta. In addition to the Squadron's Avengers, two Balliol were also on the detachment. Cdr Gilchrist was able to make five deck landings on HMS Bulwark in Sea Balliol T21 WP327/867/ST on June 24. The training, again concentrating on air weapons, was carried out without incident, and the squadron returned to Stretton on July 6.

The Attackers of 1831 Squadron were programmed to undertake their annual training on HMS Bulwark. However, because of the Suez crisis, Bulwark was not available and at short notice the venue was changed to RNAS Brawdy. The squadron arrived at Brawdy on July 30, 1956 and were soon involved in a programme of weapons training. During rocket firing practice, Sub Lt D Croll's Attacker had an egg-sized hole made in the leading edge of the port tailplane when a piece of concrete from the dummy warheads ricocheted off the sea. Luckily, the damage had no effect on the flying of the aircraft, which returned safely to Brawdy. RNAS Brawdy's Navy Day Display was held during 1831's stay at the station and during the display Lt Cdr Rougier, flying his Attacker, won an air race around a 15-mile triangular course against intense opposition from a Sea Hawk, Meteor, Sea Vampire and Sea Venom.

Unfortunately, 1831 suffered a fatal accident in 1956, when Sea Vampire T22 XL168, flown by Lt Cdr H G Tanner, dived almost vertically through cloud into the ground near Chester.

On November 9, Lt Cdr A E Frost became the new CO of 1841 Squadron on the retirement of Lt Cdr F Morell. This was to have been followed by an 1841 Squadron observer. Lt Cdr A G P Elliott being appointed as the CO of the NAD on January 1, 1957, replacing Cdr Gilchrist, who was retiring. However, with the impending, although unannounced, disbandment of the Air Branch of the RNVR, Cdr Gilchrist was requested to remain until the NAD was disbanded.

The announcement was finally made on January 9, 1957, by Rear Admiral G Thistleton-Smith and this included an instruction that no further flying was to be carried out by the Branch. There was much campaigning, particularly to save the anti-submarine squadrons, which by this time were considered more valuable than the fighter units. However, it was all to no avail and, after the final muster on February 17, the NAD was disbanded on March 10, 1957.



Lt Cdr N G Mitchell   Lt Cdr F Morrel   Cdr R I Gilchrist   Lt Cdr W A Storey



Attackers leaving Stretton

**W.R.N.S.**

The Women's Royal Naval Service was first formed in 1917 and then disbanded in 1919, with 6000 Wrens doing over 100 different jobs. On the outbreak of WW2 it was quickly reformed and reached a peak of 74000 volunteer recruits doing over 200 jobs, all over the world. In 1947 it was made a Permanent Service with about 3000 personnel and in 1977 the Naval Discipline Act was made applicable to the Service. This enabled many more trades to be opened up to women and was the first step towards integration. The W.R.N.S. was finally disbanded in 1993 and women now enter into the Royal Navy.

Most of the Wrens at Stretton were from the Northwest and several were local girls. As Wrens were volunteers they were often drafted to the Naval Establishment that was nearest to their home.

At Stretton they worked as Signallers, Telkeprinter and Switchboard Operators, Messengers, Photographers, Armourers, Drivers, Cooks, Writers, Typists, Radio Mechanics, Air Mechanics and on the runways as part of Air Traffic Control. One Wren on Air Traffic Control managed to set fire to a barn full of corn sheaves awaiting threshing. She fired a flare to warn an aircraft not to land but held it at too low an angle.

As mentioned earlier the first Wren arrived in May 1942 and the last one known about left in 1951.

To illustrate better what life was like for them we have used their own accounts. Some have been assembled from notes taken over the phone or from letters, others are as received.

**Elizabeth Barnish** lived at Hatton Cottage, Appleton Thorn with her parents and sister who was also a Wren here. She joined the Wrens in Liverpool in 1940.

As mentioned in the History she was the first Wren to arrive and made the Commissioning Pennant for H.M.S. BLACKCAP at the end of May 1942.

She worked in the Signals Office until she was demobbed in January 1946. Betty returned as a civilian Switchboard Operator later that year. In 1950 she married the Royal Marine Bandmaster, Henry Knowler and two years later followed him to Malta.

Betty has kindly donated her cap band and demobilisation papers to the archive.

**Margaret Robbins** came to Blackcap in 1942 and also lived at home in Stretton. She worked in the Public Communications Block (P.C.B.) and used ciphers and codes, the hours were 0800 to 1700, 7 days a week. She and the other Wrens were marched to St. Cross for the service one Sunday. After that she exercised the old Naval ruse of falling out with the Roman Catholics, who had no church nearby. One of her colleagues, Tessa, cycled from Knutsford every day, where she had previously worked at Caldwells.

**Pamela Jones** from Sale was also in the Public Communications Block (P.C.B.) as a Teleprinter Operator from September 1944 to 1946. Previously she had been at H. M.S. DRAKE, Devonport but got a compassionate posting to Stretton due to her mother's ill health.

Her account "Apparently I was fortunate in that my travel warrant was for Warrington, where an M.T. Wren collected me and took me to Appleton. I say fortunate as many people ended up at Church Stretton which proved confusing.

I was billeted at Grappenhall Heyes and we were taken by transport to the camp. The Chief Wren (Reg.) at the Heyes was Simpson and at Stretton, Clarke. They both mistrusted watchkeepers and were very keen.





P. Whincup

Joan Anthony and Pamela Jones  
at Stretton 9 September 1945



P. Whincup

Jean ?, Joan Anthony and Kay Jones  
outside Cabin 5, 1945

Now, of course the Heys (they've dropped the 'e') has gone, to be replaced by £1/2m houses. But they don't have cows escorting them from the cattle grid at the gate – could prove rather disconcerting in the blackout.

I don't recall exactly when we were moved to live on camp, it did make going on duty easier but the buses from Warrington were only every hour and if it was missed it entailed a mad scamper from Lumb Brook to get on duty in time and in one piece.

In the P.C.B. was the S.D.O., teleprinters, switchboard and Telegraphists (where we would tune into the U.S. Forces network in Europe in the middle of the night and hear Glen Miller's orchestra), (I had heard it live in Plymouth shortly before he was killed).

I think we invented the original toasted sandwiches. The cooks would supply us with thick corned beef sandwiches which proved very boring until someone hit on the bright idea of going into the boiler room at the end of the building just before the stoker came round and the coals were red and the transformation was delicious.

The Leading Wrens in the S.D.O. were Janie Barr and Betty Barnish, then later Betty Lloyd-Dodd. The cipher officer was 'Dinah' Shaw. The messengers were Joan Anthony, Barbara Barnish, Jim, Horace and Paddy. Teleprinter Wrens were Doris (?), Tess, myself, and when necessary we would relieve on the switchboard.

Ldg. Wren 'Janie' Stephens



P. Whincup



Joan Anthony

P. Whincup

Around VE day there was an outbreak of German measles, then later infectious hepatitis, after which we were moved to Grappenhall Hall until we were demobbed some time in 1946.



P. Whincup

Wynn ?, Josie Littlejohns,  
Betty Lloyd Dodd

The previous Christmas I spent in sick bay with tonsillitis and the benefit of the earliest penicillin which was a revolting yellow 'gunk' which was painted on with a camel hair brush, then to add insult to injury the M.O. refused to let me out on New Year's Eve (you'll only get overheated at the party and give yourself pneumonia!). He ended up as a doctor to the Royal Family, I believe! We used to go to the cinemas in Warrington, dancing at the Baths and eating beans on toast or jam on toast at the British Restaurant in Sankey Street, and drank at the

Appleton Thorn or the Cat & Lion at Stretton.

Wednesday night was the 'dance' night on camp – I remember a marine who played the 'spoons'. After VE day we even had fancy dress 'dos'. The officer in maintenance managed to make himself a suit of armour – very impressive until he put his arm round you and the metal elbow joint nipped a chunk of flesh!

I kept in touch with quite a few of my 'oppos' for some years, but gradually lost contact as time passed".

Further information from Pam – A Wren of 17, just arrived from training depot, was killed on the airfield by a plane when she was taking a message to the Control Tower. The jaundice outbreak was put down to having lots of undercooked toad-in-the-hole. The Meteorological Officer, who also got it was sent to Winwick hospital for treatment. There were bars on the windows at that time.

The bath houses on the camp were brick with asbestos roof and cold condensation used to drip on them in the bath. Transport was provided to and from dances at Burtonwood. She was brought up before the Captain once for being late back. He told her that she should have been more assertive on offering the excuse that the transport was late.

They used to walk from Grappenhall to the Spreadeagle or Dingle café at Lymm some afternoons for a ham and egg tea and then walk back.

Naylor's buses were used a lot. One day Mrs Naylor said "I hardly slept last night because we were 1/6 short on the previous day's takings". After a bit she exclaimed "I know what it was. It was Mr X, he hasn't paid for taking his pigeons to the station". Mrs Naylor was also renowned for packing the passengers in and one day one of the matelots managed to get the back door of the bus open. He and his colleagues then kept jumping out and running round to the front to get on again. Mrs Naylor eventually remarked "I don't know where you're all going but there's a heck of a lot of you got on".

Joan Anthony and herself met two Canadian pilots when they brought their planes down to Stretton for servicing in Spring '45. They stayed, while on leave in London, in the Y. W.C.A. and Overseas Officers Club. On VJ day the Wrens were questioned as to why they had got back late to the Y.W.C.A. – at 2300 instead of 2230 !



Kay Chataway and  
Pamela Whincup en route to Lymm

**Josephine Butler** “ I arrived at Stretton in 1944 aged 19 as an aerial photographic assistant after remustering from a D. R. in Scotland. I left in 1945 to train for Admin. and returned in 1946-7 as Petty Officer.

Lt. Lingard Lane was in charge of the photo section which consisted of aerial strips mapped together of airfields. He would be knowledgeable on the types of planes. It was a repair and testing base. He married an M.T. Wren Elizabeth ? from Bute, Scotland.

In 1947 Captain H.G. Scott RNVR? was in charge and 2/O J. Allingham the Wrens.

I developed metal poisoning from the chemicals and was transferred to drive the ambulance at the Sick Bay. A regular middle aged Chief P.O. was the senior after the 2 Doctors and 1 Dentist. He was known as ‘P.O. Pash’ !

I drove patients to Seaforth Hospital and Rainhill. The sailors unfortunately contracted V.D. and went for treatment whilst I drove a doctor to the source of the trouble – mainly in Manchester – I don’t think you really wanted to know that !

I was billeted in Grappenhall Hall and my special friend was Dorothy McLachlan from Glasgow. She was Captain’s Office secretary and sadly died a couple of years ago.

We went into Warrington, had perms from a lady at Stockton Heath for 2/6 and cycled along the towpaths to Lymm.

Occasional dances with the Parachute Reg. nearby.

The Wrens Sick bay was at Springfield down a hill, about a mile away. Two Q.A.R.N.N.S. Sisters were in charge. Sister M.E.T. Kind and Sister M.L. Scott. I have a book of poems that they gave me when I left. A number of V.A. D. nurses worked there too.

We loved the Hall and in the summer the tractors worked all night to get the harvest in.

I went to London and Buryfield after being recommended for promotion and training in Admin. at Eaton Hall nr Chester and returned to Stretton in the place of the Regulating Chief who was demobbed. At the Hall I shared a room with P.O. Holmes á Court, the Quarters Petty Officer.

I only have photos of the girls and ambulance men as cameras were not officially allowed.

I signed on and dealt with the gradual demob procedure, but had to leave for my mother’s illness.

I had my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party at the ‘Bells of Peover’ with a cake from home and spam sandwiches from the pub and shandies.

I regret I cannot help more as I enjoy speaking at meetings but it was not exactly an exciting place to be in the war apart from an odd doodle bug. The Clyde and London were more active.”

“P.S. The mail office was run by an ‘immobile’, Wren Madge Penney who lived at Stockton Heath and was there all through the war.”

Further information from Josephine The photo lab was in a separate Nissen hut opposite the parachute packers.

1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Regt. was stationed between Lymm and Altrincham. I think they trained at Ringway.

Personnel – Test Pilot Lt. Bill Newnham, R.N.V.R. from Birmingham. Sub Lt. John Browning R.N.V.R. from Weymouth. 3/O W.R.N.S. Daphne Blundell was in Admin Office at one time. She has been President of the Wrens Association.

**Caroline Lawrence (née Bowey)** came to Stretton in June 1943 as an Ordnance Mechanic (Armourer). In those early days there was no N.A.A.F.I. and the role was fulfilled by the Salvation Army. The Wrens gave concert parties in the cinema and local halls for the Lady Daresbury Charities. There was quite a bit of talent in the Armoury. The show was run by a Sub Lt. from the Armoury. There were two talented pianists who played together on the one piano, their names were Alan Axon and ? Iliffe. We had a chorus line, our opening and closing number I remember was :-  
Hands to Variety  
Our shows begun  
We all salute you with  
a Hi de Hi de Ho  
(Sung to the tune of Anchors away)  
I played piano for 2 singers, a P.O. Whitehead who had a lovely voice and sang songs like Vidlia, and a Welsh boy who sang 'Marta'.

She said she and her former colleagues were a bit put out when the T.V. News said that the women in the Royal Navy in the first Iraq war were the first to ever fire guns. Their job included firing guns in the test butts at Stretton.

## TRANSCRIPTION OF TAPE RECORDING DEPOSITED IN THE WRNS SECTION OF THE ROYAL NAVY MUSEUM

**George Heyhoe** recording **Caroline Lawrence** at Sarum on the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1994.

**G.H.** 'Mrs Lawrence I believe that you joined the Wrens in 1942. Could you tell us about your early part of your career and training?

**C.L.** 'I enrolled in the Wrens on the 30<sup>th</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> 1942 at H. M.S. Pembroke, Mill Hill. Unfortunately the night that we were called up was New Years Eve and we had a horrific journey down there 'cos Coventry was being badly bombed and when we arrived there we discovered that they had called up double the amount of Wrens that they should have done and we ended up sleeping on palliasses in the hallway until such time as some of them could be drafted. I was there and was then drafted on to H.M.S. Vulture and stayed there until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 2<sup>nd</sup> '43. I had enrolled as a teleprinter operator and was employed at Vulture in the Wrens office and they did their best to try and get me off the Armourers course but to no avail and I proceeded to 'Excellent' on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 2<sup>nd</sup> '43. I can remember a horrific journey, we were strafed by an aircraft at Exeter and we all ended up under the seats in the railway carriage but we arrived at Whale Island and we were billeted in, I think, the Pendragon Hotel on Southsea front which was then getting well bombarded with flak from the ack-ack guns. 'Excellent' gunnery course, was a bit of a hazard for me, 'cos I had no idea that when I signed as an A.M.O. that 'O' meant ordnance and when I realised that I was going to fire a gun or was expected to fire guns, that was the last thing I thought.

The course was pretty varied. It took us 3 months and then I was transferred to the Royal Naval Air Station at Stretton, H. M.S. Blackcap on the 17<sup>th</sup> of the 6<sup>th</sup> 1943. I spent the rest of my time in the Wrens at Blackcap and at first when I went up there I was the only Wren in an armoury of about 45 men and as a lot of people will know, even my father, who was old ex Navy wasn't very keen on Wrens.'

**G.H.** 'Did that produce any problems for you?'

**C.L.** 'It did, with the first Gunnery Officer that was up there who promptly put me into the storeroom because he didn't want me working in the armoury and I didn't have a clue what I was doing in the storeroom. I didn't know one screw from another and so I eventually had to go over to my Wren Officer and tell her that I was being misemployed, that I'd been trained to work on the aircraft and this is what I thought I should do which turned out to be a good thing. I was put out into the armoury and there I was given the gun barrels to clean, which I did and then was promptly told to put them back in the grease they had come out of. But the gunnery officer that was there was then drafted and I got a gunnery officer who was on course with me at Whale Island and knew exactly what we had been trained to do and I was put on my rightful job.'

**G.H.** 'Now, you say that you were at Blackcap for the rest of your naval service'

**C.L.** 'Yes'

**G.H.** 'One of the things we are interested in is the work of Wrens involved in the support of forces at D-Day. What was Blackcap doing in those days in 1944? It was obviously not an operational airfield'.

**C.L.** 'No, it wasn't operational. I can't speak for A, E and L Mechanics, but I do know that at the time there was a whole section at Blackcap which was entirely maintained by Wrens and the complete maintenance of the aircraft assigned to them, from the Met. Flights, was done by them. The Air Mechanic O's duties were very varied; the Station routine at Blackcap was mainly to complete daily inspections on the aircraft. This comprised of checking the Very pistols, making sure that the correct lights were in the place for the pilots, checking the guns on the aircraft, checking the gun mountings, the ammunition feeds, checking the bomb racks, the flares and the detonators. We were also trained to put warheads in torpedoes and the right fuses to be placed in bombs but Blackcap mainly dealt with, the armoury anyway, mainly dealt with the replacing of the barrels of the guns. Each squadron came in once they had fired the amount of ammunition which went through the barrels, the rifling was then damaged and the barrels had to be replaced and that was mainly what we were doing.

**G.H.** 'What type of aircraft were you working on?'

**C.L.** 'We were working on mainly American aircraft then, Hellcats, Corsairs, Wildcats, we had a couple of old Swordfish or string kites as we called them, the odd Barracuda, Barbécules, Fulmars, Fireflies, Seafires and later on Defiants.

**G.H.** 'Did you have any contact with the Americans themselves? I mean these were American aircraft which were in service in the Fleet Air Arm. Did you have any contact with the American Forces, at Burtonwood for instance?

**C.L.** 'We did. We had quite a contact with them. We were responsible for checking that all the hatches were secure after our daily inspection and had to sign to say that the work was completed. In those days they were early days for a Phillips screw in England and these were spring loaded Phillips screws which we had to fasten the hatches down with and they often were unobtainable so we used to have to make our journeys over to Burtonwood to obtain the necessary screws to secure the spring flaps. We had quite a contact with Burtonwood, they used to invite our Wrens over for many dances and compliments were returned when we had anything on in the camp they used to come over. They ...'

**G.H.** 'But did you find, how did their way of life compare with that of the British Naval Air Station?

**C.L.** 'Very, very different. I might add that our eyes used to pop out when we saw the food at Burtonwood and I can recall the Master-at-Arms calling for me when I came into my billet one night and saying "Bowey, we found a whole cheese and a huge tin of peaches and a tin of pears underneath your bunk today. Where did they come from?" and I politely told her that a nice American had given me them and I didn't know what to do with them so I put them under the bed.

**G.H.** 'Can I follow that up by asking how did the relationships between Wrens and male officers and ratings, you described an unfortunate experience early in your time, did the men otherwise tend to accept the Wrens as ordinary working hands?

**C.L.** 'Oh, I think I that had quite a good working relationship with the men. I suppose one could say that if I had come out and said "Do this, do that" I would have had a cool reception but knowing that I was the only Wren at that time and for quite a long time I was the only one until some more Wrens were trained at Milford in Staffordshire I was a long time the only Wren there but I think I managed to acquire a relationship through being very tactful and saying "Would you mind doing so and so for me" and that way I got it done, quite without any resentment from the men. I had quite a good relationship with them.'

**G.H.** 'You told me that you were advanced to Leading Wren'

**C.L.** 'Yes'

**G.H.** 'Did you have any men working under you?'

**C.L.** 'Oh yes I had quite a lot of...yeah, what were they called...'

**G.H.** 'I'm not sure what the rate was called in those days'

**C.L.** 'Naval airman, yeah, they were underneath me and they were very good. I suppose I helped, I used to play the piano, we had quite a good concert organisation there and we had two very talented pianists in the Armoury and we used to put on shows in the hall which were taken out to a cinema and the cinema was kept on for a week and we raised a lot of money for Lady Daresbury's Charities. These were quite ... er... quite a good amount was raised actually'

**G.H.** 'While you were at Stretton, was your home still at Liverpool?'

**C.L.** 'Yes'

**G.H.** 'So you were able to get home on leave fairly easily and regularly?'



**C.L.** 'There was a long time when there was no leave. We were not allowed to go home'.

**G.H.** 'Not at all?'

**C.L.** 'No. Leave was stopped for a long, long time. I did used to get home at weekends; it was a hazardous journey though. I used to have to get up at about half-past four in the morning and walk to a station, which was called West Derby Station and get a bus back so that I could get a six o'clock transport for Warrington to take me up to Stretton. I used to go back, when I did go back, armed with bottles of Camp coffee and tin of condensed milk so I could make some more coffee when I got back'.

**G.H.** 'Your father was in the Navy throughout the war I believe, did it help that you were the daughter of a senior rate in the Navy?'

**C.L.** 'I suppose it did because he used to give me a lot of advice and he used to tell me what I should do and what I shouldn't do. He also very good to me in other ways. He used to be horrified when he saw the state of my bell-bottoms and very often used to take himself off to the stores where he was stationed and acquire a new pair of bell-bottoms for me because mine were so ragged. He was exceptionally good actually.'

**G.H.** 'But you were single for the whole of your Wrens service, you didn't get married, before you left the service?'

**C.L.** 'I married after I left the service, into the Merchant Navy, not the Royal Navy.'

**G.H.** 'Well I think that covers most of it and as we discussed, your part in the preparation for D-Day was very much being in the backroom. Are there any in particular little incidents or reminiscences that you have of your service time which you think you would like to be preserved?'

**C.L.** 'Well, I suppose everybody can recall good times and bad times. There were quite a number of accidents at Stretton while I was there. One Wren from Worthing who was cycling round the perimeter and didn't hear an aircraft behind her and the prop beheaded her. Another accident which occurred through a Tilley turning over and we had seven Wrens killed who are, well, not all of them, I think four of them are buried in Appleton Church at Stretton. Many things, I can recall, on D-Day we all got, we were in pyjamas and we all were reprimanded for letting fireworks off which were acquired flares from the Armoury. But generally I think ....I had lived a very secluded life, My father was ex C.P.O. and he was very strict with me and I think my Navy days were a complete eye-opener to me. I had more freedom when I went into the Wrens than I ever had at home and I think because my father was so strict with me I never got into hot water because I always used to feel I had far more freedom than I had then. I can recall being horrified at my uniform when I first got it. We used to take our skirts into Warrington and get the tailor in Warrington to alter them all so that they fitted us properly. But I can also recall having to turn them inside out when they were shiny because we couldn't get a new one.'

**G.H.** 'Clothing was very difficult in those days'.

**C.L.** 'It was, yes, we were only allowed a certain amount, weren't we? I can also write a few funny stories about the lovely, long 'blackouts' they used to give us, as we used to call them, which we used to cut the gussets out of and turn into jerseys'.

**G.H.** 'Looking back, would you do it again?'

**C.L.** 'Oh, certainly, certainly. In fact I was very sorry that I wasn't in long before and I might add now that if I'd have known what I'd known when I was coming out, because I could have been re-engaged, it had that I was suitable for re-engagement on my papers, I think I would have liked to stay in'.

**G.H.** 'Well, thank you very much indeed, it was most fascinating.'



Reunion of former Wrens at Appleton

**Brenda Vicary** " I was posted to Stretton from Worthy Down and was there from April 1945 to December 1946. I was an Air Mechanic (Airframes) and was sent to Stretton to do storage work.



W.R.N.S. Air Mechanics (Airframes) in work 1946

We lived in a large house called Grappenhall Heyes and travelled to work by bike.

When the war ended on May 8 (my birthday and what a fabulous gift ! ) most of the ratings on base shot off to London to celebrate in Trafalgar Square. I went to Manchester in an MG sports car and had just as good a time."



B. Vicary-Finch

W.R.N.S. Air Mechanics (Airframes) off duty 1946

**Beryl M. Jones** “ I served as a Second Officer W.R.N.S. at H.M.S. BLACKCAP for just under a year from 1950 – 1951 and I did not enjoy it !!

As the only W.R.N.S. officer I was accommodated in the R.N. Sick Bay – away from the station. They were still receiving R.N. personnel being invalided from the Far East who had to be ‘built up’ so we had special rations and lived like fighting cocks !

I seem to remember the sick bay was in a village beginning with W. As far as I remember the station had weekend R.N. pilots presumably to keep their hand in.

The most amusing thing was one arrangement vis à vis the U.S. who were at Burtonwood I believe. I was responsible for paying the ship’s company so once a week a sailor would take me into the bank in Warrington in a tilly where I collected a considerable sum of money – just me and a lone sailor.

On the other side of the road were the Yanks on a similar mission. Outside the bank two white helmeted (Snowballs?) fully armed with small machine guns. Two officers also armed went into the bank.

I have to say the local people were so fascinated with the show that no-one paid any attention to us quietly tripping into the bank on the other side of the road. I don’t think this story is any use to your archives but it might amuse you. “

At first Miss Jones was at Grappenhall Heyes where the number of Wrens was reduced to two in October 1950, herself and Third Officer Dibley. The latter then left and she was moved to Springfield. She was Pay and Cash Officer on the Administration site.



**Joyce Pullen** was Petty Officer in the Aircraft Receipt and Transfer Office from February 1945 to April 1946.

#### Account 1

"One Nov. 5th I wrote a short poem (now forgotten) which S/Lt Fox, who was dressed up as Guy Fawkes, recited as he lit the bonfire. We had an enormous blaze as anything that could be gleaned from the hangars (preferably oily) was used including main planes.

We also had a Sports afternoon and I entered the 100 yds. race which I believe I won. I particularly remember suffering afterwards as I did not do any training beforehand. My legs did not belong to me for several days.

My desk in the Aircraft Receipt and Transfer office was by a window. On one occasion when the small top window was open, a newspaper parcel was thrust through it and landed on my desk. As I opened it a dead mouse fell out! I never discovered who was the culprit but always suspected one of the pilots. They were always oggling us as their room was behind ours.

We never went without our cup of char thanks to the ladies in the W.V.S. van which came round twice daily.

I do remember the name Arley Road but we cycled to the Main Camp from Grappenhall Hayes across some crossroads at Appleton Thorn. There was a church at the right hand corner and a right hand road lead to the M.T. section. One came to the Galley on the left where there was a yard of open space where we mustered for Church Parade. The entrance to the Camp was a bit further on the right. Enclosed is a sketch of the Aircraft Receipt and Transfer Office area as I remember it.

One night about 10pm 2/0 Carew Hunt decided to have fire drill at the Hayes. Most of us were in our night attire in upstairs cabins. We were ordered to climb out of a window and down an escape ladder fixed to a wall. There was no safety guard in those days.

I do not have a head for heights and turned back when I saw what I was expected to do. I hid behind some blue curtains which served as a wardrobe. 2/0 had however witnessed my flight and came stamping through the cabins in search of a girl in a green dressing gown! Fortunately she did not find me! Phew!

Yes there were characters. P.O. Marion Rickett who went berserk if the Inkspots were playing on the radio. Another Barbara Wilkinson, who always sang "American Patrol" in the ablutions in her own inimitable way and particularly the P.O. who would refer to the Admiralty as the Admirality.

I think we received our pay in a room in the same block as the A.R.T. Office. We queued before approaching the table, paybook open, saluted, announced our number (26557) (I still remember it) name and rank in order to be presented with the fortune (ha ha ) the powers that be thought they were giving us!

Happy Days!

P.S. I tackled my first packet of cigarettes in the Wrens also went down to the Pub with the lads but never told my mother."

### Account 2

"I took my Petty Officers exam and had gained main camp experience so was sent on draught again to prove that I could take responsibilities. This time I went to the R.N.A.S. Stretton known as H.M.S. BLACKCAP. I was met at Warrington Station by transport. Again the Admiralty had been at work and I was dropped off at a requisitioned country mansion called Grappenhall Hayes. It was two or three miles from the main camp which was at a village called Appleton Thorn and we were issued with bicycles.

Petty Officer rank is non-commissioned but equal to that of Army and Air force Sergeant. We had our own mess. There were only twelve of us eating together and it was heaven after the clatter of 70/80 diners at Daedalus. We also had our own Steward who laid the table with a cloth. She would bring in our food and place it on a side table beside warm plates and we would help ourselves. Civilians were having to pull in their belts and exist on rations but my breakfast consisted of a choice of cereal, bacon, egg, kidney, fried bread, tomato and toast and marmalade. We slept in beds, two to a room and were wakened in the morning by our steward with a cup of tea.

This was not part of her duties but she was a lovely lass and spoilt us out of the goodness of her heart. We also had our own sitting room and when off duty sat listening to the radio, knitting and enjoying a good laugh.

There was always a sense of humour and plenty of companionship. Occasionally tickets were available for the Halle Concerts at Belle Vue. I found listening to an orchestra a new and enjoyable experience especially as the conductor was John Barbirolli. On a Sunday evening some of us would go to the village Church. At the age of 20 I didn't think I needed Church and had no particular calling. I didn't really enjoy the Church of England Service as my family were Baptists but went along simply because I had been brought up to go every Sunday. I also enjoyed the walk back to quarters on a balmy summer evening.

We were off duty on a Saturday from mid-day. As the financial reward of being a petty officer meant that our pay was in the region of £2 pw we could afford to catch a train to Manchester, Liverpool or Southport. After having a meal for 2/6d we went to the pictures or theatre. Before catching a train back to Warrington we made a quick visit to a W.V.S. forces canteen for beans on toast for the price of 1/-.



Southport 1945  
Joan Hare, Marion Ricketts  
Barbara Wilkinson, Joyce Pullen, Kath ?

It was late when we arrived back at Hayes but P.O.s were not required to sign in. Rather than ring the bell and draw attention to the fact that it was after midnight, we would creep round to the back of the building and climb in through the sitting room window. Socially life had completely changed as there was also a camp dance on a Thursday evening. There were no tennis courts but I didn't miss them.



Pat ?, Audrey Hulme, Joyce Pullen



June Iredale, Joyce Pullen, Maureen Flynn, 'Bunny' Warren  
Audrey Hulme, Brenda Crowther, Nan Barlow (ex hangar).

You will be thinking did she ever do any work. Yes we did and were hard at it during the week. I was put in charge of the Aircraft Receipt and Transfer office and had six Wrens under my wing. Aircraft continually arrived for repairs or service. Radio mechanics removed radios for testing, male ratings dealt with electrics and Wren checkers checked lists of detailed equipment. In view of the nature of their work it was no longer infra dig for women to wear trousers but ours were called bell-bottoms.



Aircraft Receipt and Transfer Office  
Joyce Pullen, Olive Bowker, Vi Turner, unknown  
Audrey Hulme, Brenda Crowther, Maureen Flynn



When the aircraft departed a mountain of paperwork would arrive at my office and I would sort it out for action by the girls. Everything that had been removed, repaired or replaced was reordered in Articles in use Ledger. Having satisfied myself that all procedures had been adhered to papers relating to individual aircraft were despatched to its next destination.

Being a Petty Officer was not all fun and games, as we had to perform extra duties. One was to march a squad to Church on Sunday morning. No training was given and it was taken for granted that, as we had learned to do Squad Drill, we would know what to do. I found it a different kettle of fish having to give orders rather than obeying them. There was a mirror effect as their left was my right and their right was my left. All went well until I gave the order, which would take them through the gate-over there-, and on to the road that lead to the church. Squad left turn- forward march. I was the only one moving towards the gate and the squad was marching towards some Nissen huts. They realised I had given them the wrong order- half turned to come back, others marched on while some halted completely. There was utter chaos and much hilarity. I retrieved the situation, gave the correct order right turn, while I turned left and we managed to end up at church on time.

I was also on a rota of Petty Officers who were on duty in the evening in the office of the Hayes. My main duty was to check in Wrens who had gone ashore. They had to return by 10pm unless they had been granted a late pass until 10.30pm. When they were all in I would phone the duty Wren Officer and repeat all present and correct ma'am. I would then get the order to carry on Petty Officer, which meant that I went round the cabins putting the lights out.

Occasionally a Wren would be adrift or late back and I would put her on a charge. The next morning I marched her into the regulating office on the main camp. She would attend by the 3rd. Officers desk and I would announce " Wren so and so was adrift last night until such and such a time" 3/0 would ask for an explanation. This usually turned out to be a lame excuse. I missed the bus, I had a puncture and had to walk, I forgot to sign that I was on night duty. Punishment was then meted out according to how severe 3/0 thought the misdemeanour. This could be anything up to one week or more confined to barracks.

Eventually I was called to Wren Headquarters at London to appear before an Office selection board. Facing hierarchy who wore gold braid was one thing but this was different. I had not seen so much blue braid and such elderly Wren Officers before. I felt like Daniel going into the lion's den. One looked over her glasses which were on the tip of her nose. Another short, fat one had a wobbly chin when she spoke, another had greying hair pulled back in a bun and the last kept tapping her pencil on the table and welcomed me with a watery smile. Fortunately I had been warned before I left camp, not to let them intimidate me. My rather warped sense of humour took over and I thought to myself that they would make a good music hall act. I sat down as ordered and they probed me one after the other- what were my views on discipline; did I realise that an officer was expected to maintain standards and set an example; would I be prepared to serve abroad; did I think I could fit in to wardroom life, what were my interests, did I have any relations in the Navy and what was their rank.

I felt they were a bunch of nosy parkers but they had a job to do. It had already been proved that I knew my job and could take responsibility but was I socially acceptable to become an officer? I suppose I must have passed muster as a fortnight later I was called back to face my final board. After a few more questions a bombshell was dropped. It was explained that as the war in Europe was over and the Pacific reeling from the after effect of the atomic bomb the question of the Wrens becoming a permanent service was under consideration. I could therefore only be offered a temporary commission for two years. The alternative was demobilisation when my time came. It was about to commence for those who first entered in 1939.

My mind went full circle. I had been very happy in the Wrens and would like to have stayed in, but after two years, should the Force not become permanent I would be one of the last out. Those who had gone before me would have the pick of the jobs and I would even face the dole queue. I could still remember my childhood days of the 1930s when unemployment was rife. I had to make a quick decision as I was being pressed for an answer. I elected to be demobbed. I knew I had to be realistic and think about the future. I had outgrown my desire to become a Demonstrator at the Electricity Board and returning to Boots was just not on. I went along for advice from the Education Office. The officer I saw was most helpful and we chatted about my work in the Wrens and my interests and he thought I was a good candidate for the Civil Service. I had quite enjoyed the paperwork side of my job and came away with explanatory literature, specimen exam. papers and an application form.

Demobilisation was speeded up and each week we said farewell to a few more colleagues. It was a very emotional period as we packed our bags for the last time. Since then five of my closest friends have been from H.M. S. Blackcap. Whenever possible we made a point of getting together at re-unions of the Association of Wrens at Birmingham and Wembley.

I don't think any of us found it easy to adjust to being back in Civvy Street. We particularly missed the companionship and camaraderie.

I have heard it said " that Wars change things". When I think of the effect that the Second World War had on the lives of women this is very true. But I realise that it particularly affected me as a person. I had had a whale of a time. The experience I had gained had broadened my outlook, I was more confident and ambitious and I had learned a lot about people. I had also proved to myself that I had the ability to do things which others considered I was incapable of doing. It had been the making of me.

I became a temporary Civil Servant at the local Tax Office until I passed my CS exam. I was offered a choice of Departments-Ministry of Labour, Employment and Post Office Savings Bank. I could not visualise myself working in any of them. When a colleague at the Tax Office heard me mention my fourth choice he enthusiastically said " Oh, the Colonial Office- you'd have the most interesting time there". I acted on his advice and headed for London.

It was an entirely different person who arrived at Paddington Station 1946 to the one who arrived at Portsmouth in 1942. A chapter in my life had closed and another opened."